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Percy Marks



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MARTHA

Martha

BY
PERCY MARKS
AUTHOR OF "THE PLASTIC AGE"



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MARTHA

MARTHA

CHAPTER I

"Hopil pilli
Wela haiyu ha-a-a
Hopil pilli
Wela haiyu ha-a-a.

"Anusa anusa
Awe hilli haiyu
Hopil pilli
Wela haiyu ha-a-a."

THE squaws chanted the song with soft wailing voices, snapped split willow sticks that clacked like castanets, and swayed back and forth in rhythm to the song. They stood apart from the men, apparently indifferent to them.

One of the youngest of the squaws silently left the group and walked slowly to a white oak-tree where she had left her little girl. She slumped easily to the ground, lifted the child into her lap, and mechanically snapped her willow stick while she casually watched the dancers.

A young Indian stirred the dying coals and added

a couple of dry sticks which promptly began to crackle briskly and flip off streamers of sparks and little gusts of flame. A dozen men slowly wandered into a circle around the fire. Chaplets of feathers bound their foreheads, a few of them carelessly made of turkey-feathers, but most of them brilliant with a band of white or yellow wampum. Except for a large cape of turkey-feathers hanging from their shoulders to their knees, and a small skirt of feathers, the men were naked. Their brown chests and torsos were bright with sweat, and the muscles of their splendid arms and legs rippled as they began to dance.

The squaws clacked the split willow sticks monotonously in rhythm, a thin *clack, clack, clack* that beat on the ears like a plaintive tom-tom. In quavering high voices they sang the dance song, the "ha-a-a" trailing off into a wailing sigh.

The men faced the fire in a circle, rigid and waiting, so still that the feathers on their shoulders did not quiver. The light of the fire glowed on their faces and chests as they leaned slowly forward and lifted their arms stiffly from their sides. The leader began to hiss in time to the singing of the squaws, his breath bursting from his lips sharply. He stepped toward the fire as the other men began to hiss, and, every muscle in their bodies straining tensely, they too moved forward. The women wailed and *clack, clack, clacked* the willow

sticks; the men advanced a few steps and then retreated, lifting their bare feet stiffly and planting them on the ground so hard that the dust rose around them in a pale mist. Occasionally they circled the fire, only to pause and begin once more the mechanical advancing and retreating.

The sweat poured in gleaming streams down their bodies; their arms, held rigidly from their sides, trembled as they shook their shoulders in spasmodic jerks; the feathers on their heads, about their waists, and on their backs rippled and swayed, fluttered and danced. Suddenly the leader stopped. The women ceased their singing and the clacking of the sticks. For an instant the silence of the night was broken only by the snapping of the fire, once more a small heap of glowing coals, and the tired crying of a papoose. The leader started on a run into the darkness, the other man speeding fleetly after him. They were making for the sweat-house, a low circular hut with no opening but the door. There they sweated and roasted around another fire until their eyes streamed blinding tears and their throats ached with coughing; then they stripped their feathers from them and dashed out into the cold night air. The leader plunged into an ice-cold stream near-by. Unhesitatingly his followers plunged after him. For the present their part in the Feather Dance was done. Another group had taken their places around the

fire; and so it would go for a week or two, the women singing their wailing song, the men dancing, sweating, and bathing—over and over again.

Dully indifferent to the dancers, the young squaw settled the child more comfortably on her lap and played carelessly with her willow stick. The other Indians were Yukis, but she was a Pomo, and in a vague way she was proud of the difference. She was better looking than the other squaws; in fact, she was an uncommonly beautiful Indian woman. Her face was not unevenly round but a fine oval; her nose was not thick and flat with large, ugly nostrils, but straight and firm at the tip; her mouth, unlike those of most of the other squaws, was rather small with definitely modeled lips. In a few years she would undoubtedly get fat and lumpy, but her body was still firm and round under her yellow silk dress. Her straight black hair, entirely hidden by a green silk handkerchief tied under her chin, was clipped short at the nape of her neck, a token of mourning for her father who had recently died. Three bluish lines of tattoo ran in parallel streaks down her chin, three more radiated from each side of her mouth—beauty-marks to preserve her complexion.

Her dress was very beautiful, she thought, the most beautiful dress that she had ever seen. She had had it for nearly five years—it was just a few weeks younger than her little girl—and it was the

one thing in the world that she had ever really taken care of. It was canary yellow, brighter even than poppies in the noonday sun; and the waist, a clumsily made affair, had a row of large white pearl buttons down the front. The voluminous skirt was gathered into thick bunches at her waist and swirled out into yards of circumference at her feet, the hem blazing wonderfully with three rows of inch-wide ribbon, the first red, the second green, and the third blue. There was n't another squaw in the valley with a dress like it; but then, she reminded herself, not another squaw in the valley had ever had a man like Roger Baker.

The child squirmed uneasily, and she spoke softly to her in the Pomo dialect. "Go to sleep, Martha."

"No," Martha replied in the same language; "I don't want to go to sleep. It's pretty." She was tired but wide-awake. The singing was beautiful, and the dancing made her heart beat faster.

The squaw said no more. Idly she snapped the willow stick and watched the grunting dancers; idly she let her glance roam over the small group of white people standing in the shadows, their faces vague in the wavering light. Her eyes fastened with gentle interest on one man while he talked to the girl beside him and pulled absently at his yellow mustaches.

Once more the young Indian put a few sticks on the fire. As they blazed into flame, the white peo-

ple stood out clearly against the night behind them. The child stirred restlessly, excited by the prospect of new dancers. Her mother leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"Look, Martha," she said; "look at that white man talking to the girl."

"The man with his hat in his hand?" the child asked.

"Yes."

She stared curiously. The man was tall and slender and very fair. His curly hair and long mustaches were yellow, his eyes a deep blue, his nose high and arched. A handsome, merry-looking man, his unusual blondness almost startling in contrast to the brown skins of the Indians.

"He's pretty," she whispered to her mother. "What's his name?"

"Roger Baker."

Martha giggled softly. "My name's Baker, too. That's nice."

"Yes; he's your father."

CHAPTER II

DURING the gold-rush to California and for two decades following it, most of the undesirable "younger sons" of England joined the Argonauts. Roger Baker was one of them. Baker was not his name, but, as he wrote his father, that fact gave it sufficient virtue. "Besides," he added, "it sounds rather well with Roger, and I am altogether too fond of Roger to give it up, even out of respect for the family. Baker is a good, honest name, and, believe it or not, I shall try to live up to it."

He had always been a disappointment to his titled family, making a passion out of what should have been mere interests and ignoring altogether what should have been a passion. A gentleman must know how to ride, of course, but Roger rode entirely too well; he rode like a jockey. If a gentleman wants to dabble lightly in music and painting, certainly no one is going to object, but one is just as certainly going to object and object strenuously if he consorts with singers from music-hall girls up. And artists too! Roger was forever dawdling around this studio or that. In fact, he did not behave in any way as a self-respecting younger son should: he declined to study for the church or bar;

he declined to do everything but get into trouble, and, because he had nothing else to do, he got into trouble regularly, or at least into what "the family" considered trouble. Finally when he fell in love with an Italian opera-singer, his father gave him his choice; he could either go to America and be sure of a quarterly allowance or he could marry the singer and be sure of nothing but paternal fury. Since the singer firmly declined to marry him, Roger chose America and the allowance.

He soon found his way, along with other remittance-men, to California, attracted more by its fabled beauty and romance than by any hope of acquiring a fortune. For a time the wild life of San Francisco held him; then, tiring of that, he tried a mining-camp and found little there but hard work, and hard work was offensive. Gambling was more attractive, but even gambling eventually became a little monotonous; he won too regularly. "Do you know," he explained to a badly confused miner, "a run of good luck is about the deadliest thing in the world, far worse than a run of bad luck. When you lose, you get excited, thinking all the time that your luck is going to turn. You wait every second for the big pot that you're going to win, but when you just win and win and win, there's no excitement at all. It's like having every pretty girl you look at throw her arms around your neck and squeal that she's yours. I'm sick of

winning. I'm going to get out of this camp. Maybe I'll be able to have a little bad luck if I do."

He returned to San Francisco, but his luck stayed with him; so he decided to wander north along the coast. Eventually he came to Ukiah, a prosperous village set in the center of a beautiful valley. For a frontier town, it was a peaceful place, too comfortable to be very wicked. Roger stayed there a few months, working occasionally on a farm, gambling regularly and, to his great delight, not always with success. Often he visited the rancheria in the west of the valley and made friends with the Indians. They were Pomos, a friendly tribe, and they welcomed him pleasantly. At his request they taught him their simple language and told him their legends. The legends were interesting, but he found later that they were lies. When he came to know the Indians better, he learned that they are always suspicious of questions and that they will lie generously until they are firmly persuaded that they have good reason to trust the questioner.

One day after he had been in Ukiah for a couple of months, he was leaning against the corner of a saloon idly watching the dusty road that served for a street. He was humming softly to himself, and his mind was far away. He was in Covent Garden, and he could hear his once beloved Lina singing. And that tenor solo. . . What was it? How did it go? Oh, yes:

MARTHA

M'appari tutt' amor
Il mio sguardo
L'incontro, bella sì,
Che il mio cor,
Ansioso a lei volo;
Marta, Marta. . . .

He began to sing lustily, careless of who might hear him. No one was in sight anyway but an Indian girl, and he sang more fervently, if anything, as she approached. The song, however, dwindled down to a vague humming when she came closer to him; he was startled by her beauty. He had occasionally seen slender Indian girls before, but this one had a grace that was unusual. Though her back was bent under the weight of a large loosely woven basket full of acorns, a *ptci*, she moved easily and lightly. Her oval face was nun-like in its serenity; her large black eyes were calm and unembarrassed as they met his steady gaze; her teeth showed even and white when she returned his smile.

"Hello," he said in English. "Who are you?"

The girl stopped. "Susie," she replied softly.

"Susie!" he laughed. "Who in the world gave you that name? I thought that you must be called Maid of the Morning Star or something like that."

She shook her head and muttered in Pomo that she did not understand.

"I suppose not," Roger agreed. "Well, it does n't matter. Susie will do. A rose by any other name

would smell as sweet; and, Susie, you are a rose—the rose of Ukiyah. You are the prettiest Indian girl I have ever seen, and I think that I want you for my own. In fact, I am sure of it.”

Susie stared blankly at him, a shy smile on her face. She understood that he was calling her a rose and that he thought she was pretty, but the full import of what he was saying was beyond her. She stood quite still waiting.

Roger saw her confusion and promptly dispelled it by speaking to her in her own language. Her eyes lighted covetously when he mentioned silk bandana handkerchiefs, lovely calico wrappers, and maybe even a silk dress. He asked her her father's name and then sent her away with the assurance that he would soon come and take her away to his own house.

It was a simple matter to rent a small cabin near the rancheria, and it was even simpler to bring Susie to it. She offered no objections, and her father was downright enthusiastic about the plan when Roger gave him a gold piece and a flask of whisky.

For a time Roger and Susie were happy enough. She was eager to learn his ways, to satisfy his whims; and he bought her the silk bandanas and even the silk dress.

After a few months, however, when spring had come, Roger was seized once more with the wanderlust. He had to go somewhere and go soon. He

made inquiries, and then one night he put the plan up to Susie.

They had finished their evening meal and were sitting in the door of their cabin watching the glow of the setting sun on the snow-covered eastern mountains. Roger was playing his guitar and humming his favorite aria from "Marta." Susie leaned comfortably against his arm, pleased when he plucked the strings and his sleeve rubbed gently against her cheek.

Finally he finished the song and put aside the guitar.

"Susie," he began, "I think we're going away. I'm tired of Ukiah. The valley is beautiful, and the people are kind enough, but, Lord, I'm sick of it. And I've heard of a place that they say is a hundred times more beautiful than this town and where the people are n't so damned good and dull. I was talking to Pete Norwood yesterday. He's been up in the mountains, up to a place they call Round Valley. Did you ever hear of it?"

He felt her cheek rub his sleeve as she nodded.

"Me-sha-kai," she murmured.

"Me-sha-kai? That means valley of the tall grass, does n't it? Darned pretty way of saying it, too. Of course the Indians have known about it, but it is n't many years ago that the white men first got up there, and they say it's a regular paradise. Pete said he'd never seen anything like it;

land, he said, for the asking. There 's a little village in the center of the valley—they call it Covelo or something like that—and I guess it's a little hell-hole; anyway, Pete said there were five saloons and one store and another saloon or two going up. The Indians have been raising hell, too. They've had to have soldiers up there."

"Yukis," Susie said softly; "bad Injun."

"Yes, I guess so. Do you want to go up there, Susie?"

Susie had never gone to church, and she had never heard of Ruth, but "whither thou goest, I will go" was in her eyes and her voice as she replied simply, "You go; I go."

Roger understood what she meant, perhaps more than she meant, and he put his arms tenderly around her and drew her to him. "You're a good girl, Susie," he whispered, "a damn good girl."

Two days later they loaded their few belongings on a horse and topped the pack with Roger's guitar. He had a good horse and a magnificently ornamented Mexican saddle. The buckskin mare that he bought for Susie was not much to look at, but it was tough and fit for the hard trip over the mountains. Susie rode in a side-saddle after the manner of the white women.

It took them a day and a half of steady riding to cover the seventy miles. They were forced to climb Sanhedrim; and its peak, nearly eight thou-

sand feet above sea-level, was still deep in snow. The rivers were swirling rapids, and they often had to go miles out of their way to find a safe crossing, and when they found it, they had to swim their horses. They broke camp the second day long before sunrise. A few hours later they came to what is now known as Inspiration Point. Roger stopped his horse and stared, his breath breaking from him in an exclamation of wonder. Far below them lay Round Valley, the long shadows of the eastern mountains stretching half-way across it.

For minutes he sat quietly on his horse. Finally he exclaimed excitedly, "Look, Susie, look!"

"Round Valley," said Susie.

"Yes, Round Valley. My God, Susie, it is paradise. All white and green and blue and gold. What is that gold, anyway, Susie? See what I mean? That great splash of gold 'way out at the other end of the valley. What is it?"

"Poppies."

"Poppies! Of course, poppies! Lord, Lord, think of it! Oh, Susie, look! Surely you can see that this is the most beautiful place in the world. Look at those mountains, so white and blue. And the valley! Did you ever see anything so green? Look how round it is."

Susie nodded and grunted in affirmation. "Round," she said softly, "Round Valley."

Roger did not hear her. He was gazing in awe at the beauty below him. When he finally spoke, his voice was reverent. "I've been all over Europe, in Switzerland—everywhere, and I've never seen anything like this, never! Why, Susie, not even England in spring is so beautiful."

The Indian girl had never heard of Europe or Switzerland or England, but she was used to hearing him say words that meant nothing to her; so she waited in silence, knowing that eventually they would start down the mountain.

"Come," Roger said at last; "we've got to go on. Unless I miss my guess, we've got several hours of riding before us. I'm almost afraid to get to the valley. God did a grand job, but I can imagine what men are doing down there. It looks like Eden from here. I bet it'll turn out to be a pigsty when we get there."

The valley was n't a pigsty; the white men had not been there long enough really to make it their own. The few houses were inconceivable ugly shacks, but there were only a few of them. Much of the valley was still free of fences, and the meadows were lush with wild grass. Everywhere there were trees: locusts, black walnuts, willows, buckeyes, madroñas, and oaks that rivaled redwoods in size and surpassed them in beauty. The floor of the valley was as flat as the surface of a

lake, and from its edge it looked like a lake, the green grass rippling and swaying like waters ruffled in a breeze.

When Roger and Susie finally entered the valley, they found that they still had three miles of travel ahead of them before they finally reached Covelo, the small settlement of whites. Except for the five saloons and one store, Covelo hardly deserved the name of village. There were a few houses scattered here and there at wide intervals, and that was all.

Roger found that there was still a little land in the east of the valley that had not yet been claimed; so he built a hut, filed his papers, and considered himself the proprietor of one hundred and sixty acres of remarkably fertile land. If he remained on the claim for five years and improved it a little, he would become its legal owner; and, so much was he attracted to the valley, he felt sure that he would remain the five years.

For a time life was almost idyllic. He was comfortably busy tilling his land and improving his cabin, Covelo was within easy riding-distance, and the gambling in the saloons was constant and lively. Then Susie ousted him from his paradise in one brief, matter-of-fact sentence. She told him quietly that she was going to have a papoose in a few months.

In his careless way Roger had not seriously

thought of the possibility of a child. Now that he knew that there was one coming, he was dazed and miserable. What would he do with the brat, anyway? Take it home to England and show it to its grandfather? He could hear himself saying, "Pater, I've brought you a possible heir. This is my son. He's a half-breed Indian. His mother was a Pomo squaw, the handsomest Indian woman in Mendocino County."

He laughed bitterly. A half-breed! Ugh! Why in hell did Susie have to go and have a baby for, anyway? He might have known that the fool squaw would do something idiotic like that. What a damn fool he was to take up with her in the first place!

Such were his first thoughts, but his second were less bitter and more just. He could not bring up a half-breed child; that he knew; but he could not desert Susie, either, just because she was going to bear him a baby. But—damn it!—he could n't *stay* with her!

Susie was perfectly placid, and Roger did not waste much time in sentimental ponderings over her approaching motherhood. He had seen too much of the Indians to do that. A child to her was not a thrilling miracle; it was merely a result. One lived with a man; one had a papoose—that was all. She accepted the situation in exactly the same spirit as she accepted the rising of the sun. Both

were inevitable. She expected to have many papooses. What difference did it make?

Roger was rather ashamed of his final decision, but it was the only one that seemed feasible. When the child was born, he almost changed his mind. There was something about the girl baby that held him; she called forth a parental instinct that could not be denied. Susie made a little basket for the baby out of white willow reeds, a *hai-katol*, a small cradle without rockers. It was shaped like a felt slipper with the heel end missing. When the baby was in its basket tightly wrapped in blankets, its round black eyes staring at the strange world, Roger found it so appealing that more than once he took the basket from Susie's back, where she always carried it, and played with his daughter until she dozed happily off to sleep.

Naming the baby he found a fascinating business. No name, however, seemed completely satisfactory. Finally he thought of Lina, the lovely singer whom he had once adored. But Lina was such an absurd name for an Indian child. He could n't call her that.

He leaned in the doorway of the cabin thinking. He could hear Susie moving softly about her household tasks, her bare feet whispering across the earthen floor.

"Marta, Marta," he hummed, "tu sparisti. . . ."

Then he stopped short. By Jove, that was it—Martha!

He turned and strode into the cabin. "Susie," he cried, "I've got the name for the baby."

The baby was lying on the bed, and Susie was leaning over it. She looked up and waited.

"We'll call her Martha. Do you remember the day I first met you? Well, I was singing a song from an opera called 'Martha.' It's my favorite opera, and we'll name the baby after it. Her name is Martha."

Susie had no idea of what an opera might be; nor did she care, but she understood well enough that Roger wanted to call the baby Martha, and since that was a name familiar to her, she was quite content. As a matter of fact, she would have been equally content if she had never heard of the name. A name to Susie was like bearing a child—unimportant but necessary.

"Martha," she said gently, "Martha Baker."

Repelled, Roger wrinkled his nose. He had n't thought of the Baker part of it, but, of course, the baby could n't get along with just Martha; some sort of second name was necessary, and, he supposed, it would have to be his. So used was he to calling himself Baker that he did not remember for an instant that it was not really his name. When that saving thought came, he grinned happily and said: "Sure, Martha Baker. Of course—Roger

Baker's daughter Martha. Martha Baker. Sounds pretty good, I think."

A few days later he told Susie that he had to go to Ukiah for some money, being very careful not to use the word "remittance," since he did not care for any one to know who he was or where his money came from. He assured her that he would be back in a week, and he kept his promise. He brought her a bolt of yellow silk—the color made him a little ill—a box of white pearl buttons, and three spools of ribbon, red, blue, and green. The material was for a dress, such a dress, Roger said, as no woman had ever worn before—and he believed what he said.

Susie, as was her way, made no comment, but Roger knew her well enough to see that she was satisfied to the depth of her desire. When she had ceased fondling the silk, he led her gravely to the bed and made her sit down on it. Then he sat down beside her. For a few moments he was silent, and when he finally did speak, his voice was low and his eyes were turned away.

"Susie," he began, "I hate to tell you what I'm going to do, but I've just got to do it; that's all. I feel awfully rotten about it; I know that it is n't cricket, but I know that I'll feel a damn sight rot-tener if I don't do it." He paused. For a fleeting second he looked at her; then his gaze slipped to the floor.

"I'm going away," he said suddenly. "I've got to; that's all. Damn it, I've *got* to!"

Susie looked at him curiously. She understood that he was going away and that he was going away permanently, but she did not understand his emotion. She had always expected him to go away. He had n't married her, and white men always left squaws when they did not marry them; often they left them when they did marry them. She was neither surprised nor distressed. He had lived with her for a long time; he had been good to her; he had bought her a beautiful silk dress. What more could one expect?

Roger waited—for he did n't know what. Tears probably. But Susie said nothing; she, too, waited. At last Roger found the silence unbearable and jumped to his feet.

"Damn it, Susie," he cried, "I feel like a dirty cad, but I can't go on living with you forever. You must understand that. I'm twenty-five years old, and I've never done anything worth while in my life, but I've never done anything rotten like this. If I go on with you, I'll just degenerate into a common squaw-man." He paced up and down excitedly, waving his hands and looking everywhere but at Susie. "We've got to make a break sometime, and it'll be easier now than later." Suddenly he faced her. "Do you hate me, Susie?"

She shook her head.

"Thank God for that! Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

"Forgive?" She did not understand the word.

"Yes, forgive. Oh, what in hell is your word for that?" He thumped his forehead. "Well, if you 've got one, I 've never heard of it. I mean—Damn it! what do I mean? Oh, it does n't make any difference so long as you don't hate me. Where will you go, Susie, when I 'm gone?"

"Yukis," she replied quietly.

"You can go to them? They 'll take you in?"

She nodded.

"You don't want me to take you back to Ukiah?"

"No. Stay Round Valley. Yukis take me."

She was quite calm, and he stared at her in astonishment. He began to wonder if he was n't wasting a lot of emotion. Perhaps . . . Well, thank God, she was n't making a fuss, anyway. But Martha . . . Lord, he hated to leave the little tike! . . . He 'd like to do something for her.

Since Susie said nothing, he went into the yard and brought the packhorse around to the door. Still silent, Susie helped him to make the pack and draw the ropes taut. Finally all his movable possessions were on the horse except the guitar. He was about to tie it on to the top of the pack when he had an idea. Taking Susie by the hand, he led her into the cabin. Once more they sat down on the bed.

"Susie," he said soberly, "everything that I

leave is yours. I suppose you can sell the stuff for something, or you can keep it—just as you like. I'm leaving the buckskin mare for you, too; she's yours. And here—" he stuck his hand in his trousers pocket and drew out a leather purse—"here is fifty dollars." He counted out ten five-dollar gold pieces and put them in her hand. "That ought to keep you for some time. Is it enough?"

Susie looked dazedly at the shining coins. Enough? They were a fortune.

"'Nough," she said and nodded.

He had placed the guitar on the bed. He picked it up and laid it across his knees. "I brought this from England, Susie, and that's a long, long way. But I want the baby to have it. Promise me that when she is a little girl you will give it to her and tell her that it was her father's."

Susie touched the guitar and looked at the baby sleeping in its basket. "Papoose," she muttered. "Martha."

"Yes, Martha's. You'll give it to her and tell her that it was her father's?"

Susie nodded, and he knew that she understood. He rose and crossed the room. Soberly he leaned over the baby; then he picked it up, basket and all.

"Good-by, Martha," he whispered. A lump choked his throat. "Good-by, you lovely little girl: I'm afraid you're going to hate me some day, and God knows that I won't blame you if you do.

Good-by, my dear." He bent and kissed the baby's soft cheek. Turning, he handed the basket to Susie. He placed both hands on her shoulders and looked into her calm eyes. "Good-by, Susie. You're a good girl, and I hope life's good to you." Tenderly he kissed her forehead. "Good-by."

She said nothing, but, holding the baby, she followed him to the door. He mounted his horse and took the lead-rope for the packhorse in his right hand. As he rode down the path toward the road, he gathered the rope and reins into his left hand and turned in his saddle to wave at Susie.

"Good-by," he called.

She lifted her hand, and he thought that he heard her say good-by. Then he came to the road, and, the dust rising in heavy clouds about him, he passed around a curve and out of sight.

He left the valley at once, but every spring he returned. As he said, the beauty of the place held him. "I've got to see those mountains with snow on them," he would explain, "and the fields of poppies and lupine. That valley gets you. It's like sin, beautiful and degenerating. You leave it—but you always go back."

He and Susie never met again, and her last glimpse of him was at the Feather Dance when Martha was five years old. Soon afterward he was called home, his father having decided that it was easier to forgive a son's sins than to endure a wife's sorrow.

CHAPTER III

MARTHA BAKER lived with her mother until she was seven years old. Within a month after Roger's departure Susie aroused the ardor of another white man, Martin Colfax, a hard-working farmer more than forty years old. Since Susie had remained in Roger's cabin, Colfax acquired with her the cabin and the hundred and sixty acres. In due time he got his deed from the Government and felt that he was settled for life, but a month later he accepted an offer to sell. He told Susie that he was going to the mountains and settle on a section of government land.

A few days before they left the valley, the agent of the Indian Reservation rode up to the cabin door. He was a slight, wiry man with a thin nose and black hair and mustaches. Colfax was sitting in a chair tilted back against the house, smoking his pipe.

"Howdy, Mr. Armstrong," he said politely, letting his chair fall to an upright position.

"Good afternoon, Martin," Armstrong replied and dismounted from his horse. "How do you happen to be home? I thought you 'd be out in the fields."

Colfax pulled at his stubby brown beard and grinned. "No more work for me on this place. I've sold it to George White. I'm goin' up to the mountains next week."

"So! I had n't heard. George White seems to be buying up the whole valley. Well, I guess he can afford to." Armstrong stroked his horse's nose and waited for Colfax to say something, but Colfax continued to suck his pipe and pull his beard. Armstrong was sorry that he was home; he would have much preferred to have talked to the squaw, but since she was nowhere visible, he decided that he would have to talk to the man.

"I understand, Martin," he began, "that you have a little half-breed girl here six or seven years old."

"Yeah, we have," Colfax answered, "but she ain't mine. She's Susie's. Her name's Martha Baker, an' she's a nice little gal, too. Purty as a pitcher. Wanta see her?"

"No; not necessarily. I've come to see about your sending her to school. She's old enough, you know, and the Government requires that every Indian and half-breed child go to school."

"Yeah, I know, but I thought the Injuns had burnt down the school. You ain't got a new one, have yuh?"

"No, not yet, but the Government is going to build us one soon. In the meantime we are holding

classes at our house. Will you tell her mother that she must bring the child to school?"

Colfax leaned forward and spat. "Sure," he agreed, "sure, I'll tell her. But how's she goin' to school when we're going' up to the mountains?"

"I had n't thought of that. We have n't any place that we can use for a dormitory since the fire, and I don't know what we can do with the little girl." Armstrong, perplexed, patted his horse's neck and wrinkled his forehead in thought.

Just then a little girl came out of the house, and, seeing a stranger, sidled shyly up to Colfax, nestling against him as he put his arm in clumsy affection around her.

"Here's Marthy," he said. "Nice little gal, too."

Armstrong looked at the child in surprise.

Despite her bare legs and feet and dirty black dress, she was extraordinary. There were plenty of good-looking half-breed children in the valley but none with so odd and rare a beauty. Her hair was as black as an Indian's and as straight, but much finer and softer. It fell in a thick braid below her waist. Her large eyes were so black that the pupil was lost in the iris, and they were startling in their intensity. Armstrong had never seen a half-breed with a skin as light as this child's. It was n't white; neither was it brown nor olive. He could n't find a word for it. It was a dusky, creamy

coloring that had no name but which was strangely exotic and strangely beautiful. Her nose was short and straight—a white child's nose—and her lips, her most unusual feature, were delicately carved and coral pink. Never in his wide experience had Armstrong seen a half-breed with that color in its lips. An exquisite child, as strange and lovely as a tiger-lily.

"So you're Martha," he said gently.

She stared at him, round-eyed and timid.

"I'm Mr. Armstrong, Mr. James Armstrong, and I'm the agent at the reservation. I've come to see your mama about putting you in school. You'd like to go to school, wouldn't you?"

Martha shook her head to express a vigorous negative.

"No?" Armstrong raised his eyebrows and looked at her in well simulated surprise. "You don't want to go to school? Well, well, well. You look like such a bright little girl, too. We'll teach you to read and write and figure and cook and sew. Wouldn't you like to learn to sew?"

Martha nodded but continued to stare, snuggling close to Colfax.

"Of course you would." Armstrong smiled, and his smile was so gentle and friendly that a shy little answering smile rippled for a second across Martha's face.

"Ah, there!" he exclaimed. "Now we under-

stand each other. You would like to go to school; now, would n't you?"

Again the child shook her head, this time adding a muttered no.

"Why, Marthy!" Colfax remonstrated. "That ain't no way to act. You know you want to go to school. What for are you tellin' Mr. Armstrong you don't want to go?"

"It's an Indian school." The child's reply was shy but curiously definite and final. It was evident that she thought she had given a complete explanation.

"Well," Colfax demanded, "what of that? Ain't you an Injun? Ain't your mother an Injun?"

Instantly her shyness was burned out in a blaze of fury. She tore herself away from Colfax's protecting arm, her face paled into a ghastly gray, and her eyes sparkled and glittered.

"I ain't!" she shrieked. "I ain't! I ain't! I ain't an Injun! I ain't!"

"Why, Marthy, what you talkin' about? You know you are. Your mother's a squaw. Don't that make you an Injun?" Colfax's tone was kindly and pacifying.

The child flew at him, pummeling his chest with her tiny fists. "I ain't, I ain't, I ain't!" she screamed, her voice shrill with hysteria.

Colfax put his pipe in his mouth, caught her hands, and held her quiet. "Now, listen here to

me, Marthy," he began in his slow, heavy way; "that ain't no way to act. What will Mr. Armstrong think of yuh? What you sayin' you ain't an Injun for? You quit yellin' an' tell me."

Martha stood still, her hands in Colfax's, and stared at him, her face still pale and her eyes glittering furiously. But she said nothing. She just stood rigidly still and stared.

Armstrong dropped the bridle-reins and walked quickly to the child.

"I think I understand, Martha," he said gently, dropping on his knees beside her. "Your daddy was a white man; so you 're a little white girl? Is that it?"

The sympathy in his voice and the understanding in his words conquered her anger. She drew her hands away from Colfax's and turned to Armstrong.

"Yes," she answered proudly; "my pop was a white man, awful white. I seen him once. It was at the feather dance. He had curly yaller hair an' a yaller mustache. He was white, an' I 'm white. He lef' me his guitar, too." She paused and then added arrogantly, "I ain't goin' to no Injun school."

This proud, beautiful child, already instinctively fighting for what she thought was her rightful place in the world, moved Armstrong deeply. He was a minister of the gospel and an honest Christian, trying earnestly to follow the example set him by his

Lord. Instantly he resolved to help the child, determined that she should not waste her life in the mountains with the stupid Colfax and his squaw.

He put his arm around her and drew her to him. She suffered his caress but stood well away from him, independently erect.

"You don't have to go to the Indian school," he said comfortingly. "I know just how you feel about it. But don't you worry. We'll fix it up." He looked at Colfax. "Have you any children of your own, Martin?"

"Yeah. Sure. A baby a year an' a half old. It's back somewhere with Susie."

"Then I don't suppose you're very anxious to bring Martha up, too?"

"Marthy's all right jes' as long as she don't get into one of her tempers. She's a nice little gal, but, of course, I'd jes' as soon somebody else'd bring her up. Kids is expensive."

"So they are," Armstrong agreed, still with his arm around Martha; "so they are, but I wish I had a few of my own. Now, what I want to do is this: I want to take Martha to my house and bring her up. My wife is n't very strong, and in a year or two Martha will be a real help to her. She teaches the school, you know, and I'm sure she'll be glad to teach Martha by herself. What do you think? Is it all right?"

Colfax had been filling his pipe while Armstrong

talked. He lighted it, puffed at it vigorously, and then tilted his chair back against the cabin. "Sure, it's all right. I'll miss Marthy, I guess, but it's all right." He pulled at his beard and puffed comfortably at his pipe.

"But how about her mother?"

"Oh, Susie won't say nothin'. You needn't worry none about her. I'll tell her that you're goin' to take Marthy, and that'll be all there is to it. Susie's a damn good squaw."

As Armstrong had explained his plan, Martha had relaxed in his arm and leaned lightly against him.

"Would you like to go to my house," he asked, "and live with me and Mrs. Armstrong? You'll not have to live with the Indians at all, and Mrs. Armstrong will give you lessons all by yourself. How would you like that?"

"Can I take my guitar?"

"Of course you can, and Mrs. Armstrong will teach you to play it. Maybe she'll teach you to play the piano, too. You can take anything with you you want to."

"Then," said Martha definitely, "I'll go."

CHAPTER IV

NEITHER Susie nor Mrs. Armstrong raised any objections to the plan, but Susie felt more deeply about losing Martha than Colfax ever suspected. Martha meant Roger to her, and Roger meant more even than a yellow silk dress; he meant first love, if Susie's dumb animal affection for him could be called love. Certainly she did n't call it that, but she knew that the tall young man had aroused something in her that Colfax never could. Colfax was kind enough, but he never caught her to him in sudden warm embraces; he never played a guitar in the twilight and sang strange songs; he never looked at her tenderly and told her that she was beautiful. Roger had been different from all other men, and wonderful because he was different. To him she had been a loved woman; to Colfax she was a damn good squaw. She never analyzed the difference, but she felt it; and losing Martha was losing the last human trace of Roger.

She said no word of protest, however; merely tied Martha's few belongings into a bundle and lifted her on the horse behind Armstrong when he called for her the following afternoon. The child had the guitar hanging by a cord from her neck when she came out of the cabin, and she clung to it when

Susie lifted her upon the horse. Armstrong hung the bundle on the pommel of the saddle and looked back over his shoulder at Martha.

"Are you all right back there, Martha?" he inquired solicitously.

Martha clutched the guitar to her breast with her right hand and grasped his coat with her left.

"Sure, I'm all right," she answered proudly. "I can ride." And she was not exaggerating. Like most of the children in the valley, she had learned to ride as soon as she could walk, and she felt quite as much at home sitting on a horse as she did sitting on the ground; in fact, she had sat on both far more often than she had ever sat on a chair.

"Aren't you going to say good-by to your mother?" Armstrong asked as the child waited in silence for him to start.

She looked down at Susie standing patiently by the horse.

"Good-by, Mom," she said casually.

"Be good girl," Susie murmured.

"Sure. Giddap, horsie," and she dug her bare heels into the horse's flanks.

The horse, a gentle, well-broken animal, started slowly down the path toward the road.

Armstrong turned in his saddle. "Good-by, Susie," he called.

Susie did not answer. She stood watching them

until they passed, clouded by dust, around a curve and out of sight—just as Roger Baker had, seven years before. Then she went slowly into the cabin; her papoose was wailing.

Armstrong's home was all the way across the valley, and for some time he and the child rode in silence, jogging comfortably along. Then Martha began to sing, extemporizing both the words and tune.

"The poppies are gold" [she sang], "gold, gold, gold.
The buttercups are yaller, the poppies are gold;
The lupine is blue, the poppies are gold;
The larkspur is purple, the poppies are gold;
The poppies are gold, gold, gold."

Armstrong guessed rightly that she was looking about her and incorporating whatever she saw into her song, never failing, however, to return to her refrain, "the poppies are gold."

"The mountains are blue, the poppies are gold;
The hollyhocks are pink, the poppies are gold;
The trees are green, the poppies are gold;
The poppies are gold, gold, gold."

She sang about the apple-trees that were then lovely bouquets of pink and white; she sang about all the other trees that were in bloom in the orchards, cherries, plums, pears, and crabapples; she sang about the snow, white and glittering on Sanhedrim's peak, about the few roses that some of the

settlers had planted in front of their cottages, about the red berries on the madrona-trees, about the cattle browsing in the fields, about a sow with a litter of pigs—about everything in her range of vision. Her voice was sweet and clear and the little tune not unpretty. When they reached the western side of the valley, which was still untouched by a plow and known in Covelo as the plains, she ceased singing and sat quietly on the horse.

"Go on, Martha," Armstrong said; "go on and sing that pretty song. Why did you quit?"

"I'm lookin'," she replied.

"At what?"

"At the poppies."

They were riding through fields of poppies, acres of them, their brilliant gold masses broken here and there by the cold blue of the lupine flowers and the soft purple of the larkspur.

"They're pretty, aren't they?" Armstrong asked.

"Yeah."

As they rode the last half-mile, Armstrong pondered deeply about the child behind him. What was she, anyway? He wondered what her father was like; he thought of her fury the day before, of her song, of her silence before the glory of the poppies, of her strange exotic beauty, of her phlegmatic Indian mother, of her insistence that she was white.

Mrs. Armstrong was waiting on the porch to welcome them when they reached the cottage. She was a little woman with gentle brown eyes and a wistful, vague smile that were rather pathetic and altogether appealing. Her heavy brown hair, coiled into a large bun on the top of her head, seemed too heavy for her to carry, but everything pathetic about her was conquered by her nose, so puggy it was, so humorous, so gallantly sticking its round, snub end up into the troubles of the world. When one noticed Jane Armstrong's smile or her eyes, he wanted to weep in sympathy; but when he noticed her nose, he had to grin. No one with that nose could ever be quite down and out, and although she was often weary almost beyond endurance, a little depressed and despairing perhaps, she always managed eventually to find something amusing about her worries and to beat them into a quiescent pulp.

Armstrong leaped from the horse and held out his arms to Martha. She calmly ignored them. First she lifted the guitar cord from her neck and handed the instrument to Armstrong; then she skillfully slid down the horse's flank to the ground.

Mrs. Armstrong ran down the steps and looked at the child.

"Oh, you little beauty!" she cried. "Jim, she's the loveliest thing I've ever seen. Martha, you come right here to me and get acquainted. You're

so lovely that I've got to make a fool of myself and simply hug the life out of you."

She knelt down by the child and put her arms around her. Martha looked at her curiously for a second and then smiled.

"What a funny nose you've got!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Armstrong laughed. "Yes, isn't it? I laugh myself weak every time I look in a mirror."

"What's a mirror?"

"Why, it's a looking-glass."

Martha stared at her uncomprehendingly. "A lookin'-glass?"

"Dear me, child, don't you know what a looking-glass is? Have n't you ever looked into a glass and seen yourself?"

Martha shook her head.

"Well, if you'll give me a hug and kiss, I'll take you right inside and let you see how dirty you are and how beautiful you are."

She smiled, and without a word Martha moved forward and put her arms around her neck. She was rather embarrassed by the warmth of Mrs. Armstrong's embrace and kiss, but she suffered them quietly.

When they were once over with, however, she drew back. "Now show me the lookin'-glass," she demanded.

Martha first entered the Armstrong house to gaze wonderingly at her own reflection, and she re-

mained there happily for eleven years. No one in the valley led a more secluded life. Occasionally she went with Mrs. Armstrong to Covelo to do some shopping; but, outside of going to church Sunday evening, that was her entire connection with the village. Mr. Armstrong did double duty as a pastor; he preached to the Indians Sunday mornings on the reservation, and Sunday evenings he preached to the white people in the little white Presbyterian church. By the time Martha was sixteen she was playing the organ in the Indian church, but Mrs. Armstrong always played for the evening service in Covelo. She never suggested that Martha take her place, fearing that the white people might resent a half-breed invoking music to the praise of their God.

The Armstrongs were the most cultivated people in the valley, and they gave Martha the full benefit of their education. Mrs. Armstrong soon found that the girl's musical gifts far exceeded her own, but she could not get her to practise on the rose-wood square piano which had been so expensively brought over the mountains. She learned to play hymns on the piano and the reed-organ, but that small accomplishment seemed to satisfy her completely; her whole musical soul was centered in her father's guitar. For hours at a time she would sit thrumming and singing sentimental songs. She never explained to Mrs. Armstrong, but she never

felt all white except when she was playing the guitar.

The Armstrongs had more books than all the rest of the valley put together; they owned nearly two hundred of them: a dozen of Dickens's novels, several of Bulwer Lytton's, half a dozen of Thackeray's, a few of Ouida's, a complete set of the Waverley novels, and "Uncle Tom's Cabin." They had a complete set of Shakspeare, too, a volume of Longfellow and another by Whittier, and other poetry in abundance, Shelley, Wordsworth, Scott, Milton, Mrs. Felicia Hemans, Josiah Holland, and, above all, Byron. Martha made one try at Mr. Armstrong's numerous volumes of sermons and promptly gave them up for all time, but the novels she read and reread, and she was a slave to Byron's poetry. The romantic tales, especially "The Bride of Abydos," inevitably brought tears to her eyes, tears of which she was vaguely ashamed but which would come nevertheless. Scott's novels were her favorites—both Dickens and Thackeray rather confused her—and she thought "Ivanhoe" the most beautiful story in the world, because in an indefinite sort of way she always identified herself with Rebecca. Just wherein there was an analogy between herself and Rebecca she did not know, but she felt that there was one somehow.

Mr. Armstrong assured her that "Hamlet" was

the greatest play ever written, but she thought most of it tiresome and the Ophelia part of it too sad. She liked "Romeo and Juliet," though she condemned the nurse's vulgarity without mercy. The Presbyterian influence, which naturally dominated the Armstrong household, in the end conquered Shakspeare. Much of his poetry was very nice, she said, but she could n't abide the dirty things in his plays.

Mr. Armstrong explained that times and customs change and that Queen Elizabeth had not been offended with lines that horrified Martha.

She was sixteen at the time and had very definite ideas of her own.

"Dirt is dirt," she said hotly. "The century has n't anything to do with it. If Queen Elizabeth was n't offended, she ought to have been. She must have had a nasty mind. A hunk of dirt was a hunk of dirt five hundred years ago just as much as it is now. Besides, I'm not living in the seventeenth century; I'm living now; and Shakspeare's plays are dirty now, and I don't like them." Her black eyes sparkled as she looked across the table at Armstrong and waited for his reply. He had none to make. In his heart he agreed with her; he had simply felt it his duty to make her understand that Shakspeare was the greatest English poet and dramatist. He did n't really know why, but since every-

body seemed to think so, he passed on the information to Martha as a necessary part of her education.

Martha grew up in a household in which books were discussed, where good English was spoken, where ideals were considered a necessity of life. Not so much could be said for any other house in the village. There were perhaps a few people who occasionally read a book, a few who spoke respectable English, and a number who tried to be good according to their lights, but the Armstrongs were the only people who combined in themselves all of these virtues. As a matter of fact, when Martha was eighteen she was, according to Covelo standards, a highly educated young woman. She was an expert cook and seamstress; she could play not only the piano and organ but the guitar as well; she could sing; and she had read more than a hundred books.

And she was beautiful. The promise of her childhood loveliness had been more than fulfilled. She had grown into a tall, slender young woman, moving with quiet grace and sure step, shy with strangers but hiding her shyness behind a natural dignity that was both unusual and impressive. Her skin was always without color, and it always remained that indefinite tone, dusky and creamy, that defied naming. But her lips retained their coral pink, and their pinkness was startlingly vivid against the bril-

liant white of her even teeth and the vague darkness of her cheeks. He nose was perfect in its modeling, straight and slender with sensitive nostrils; and queening her beauty like a crown were her masses of black hair rising in a soft pompadour away from her low forehead only to sink at once into firm, shining round coils on the top of her head.

She was a proud young beauty, almost hard in her manner except to the Armstrongs. When she went to church in Covelo, she spoke to no one; when she went into the village with Mrs. Armstrong she kept her gaze modestly on the ground; and when she was among the Indians—and Mr. Armstrong's work made it necessary that she should be—she passed them by as if they did not exist. When she was twelve years old she tore long strips of skin from an Indian boy's cheeks with her fingernails, and as she grew older other young Indian bloods found her beauty desirable. Some of them retreated frightened by the fire in her black eyes; others, more stupid, continued their advances. Then they either lost some skin or got a crack on the side of the head that turned the world into a dizzy haze and desire into a past memory.

After a time the Indians left her strictly alone, and the white men in the valley had hardly heard of her. True, it had been remarked in the saloons that that Martha Baker out at Armstrong's was a hell of a pretty girl, but since no white man ever

had an opportunity to speak to her, the conversation rarely went beyond casual remarks about her beauty. One man once observed with a leer that he guessed Armstrong knew what he was doing keeping that pretty breed around, but he found that the remark was not popular. Most of the men in the saloon thought that a preacher came pretty near to being a woman, but Armstrong was respected in the valley, and the saloon loungers were quick to resent any slur against him. No weakling could have handled the Indians the way Armstrong had, and a man like him was a man—damn it!—even if he was a preacher.

Outwardly serene and placid, Martha grew into young womanhood, but deep inside of her were vague dreams and desires, fancies that frightened her, a hunger for love that flamed insistently, and a determination to win her birthright that never wavered. Burned on the retina of her mind was the picture of her father, his face lighted by the fire—his blue eyes, his yellow hair and mustaches, his white, white skin. Her father—Roger Baker. She never thought of Susie. Armstrong told her once that her mother was still in the mountains with Colfax. She had made no reply; she was n't interested. But Roger Baker, her father who was so white—ah, he was different! When she thought of him she would clasp the guitar tight to her breast and fondle it as one would a child.

Sometimes she looked in the mirror and examined her face for a trace of Indian blood, and then she would smile as the mirror assured her that not a feature was Indian. What did her black hair and eyes matter? Lots of white people were as dark as she was; lots of them had black eyes and black hair. Why, Mr. Armstrong's hair was almost as dark as hers, and she had seen a woman in church, a Spanish woman, whose eyes and hair and skin were all darker than hers; anyway, her skin was darker. Her eyes would shine happily as she gazed fascinated in the mirror. She was white, white. . . .

CHAPTER V

SHORTLY before Martha's eighteenth birthday a slight incident turned the calm, gray fabric of her life into a shining silver tapestry woven with gleaming figures of pure gold. The placid routine of the Armstrong household was shattered into shimmering fragments, half of them wonder, half of them fear; and the fear was as thrilling as the wonder.

None of it probably would ever have happened if Mrs. Armstrong had n't had a sick headache and been forced to go to bed.

"It is just like me to get sick, Martha," she said, smoothing the cold compress on her forehead and sighing, "when we planned to go into Covelo. And you just can't go on working on your dress until we match up that insertion. I know how much you want to finish it, too."

Martha leaned on the foot of the bed. "I can go in and get it, Mrs. Armstrong." The natural gravity of her face trembled into a vague smile. "Heaven knows I'm big enough; and I do want to finish the dress."

Mrs. Armstrong pressed her hands against her

throbbing temples. "Yes, of course, you are big enough, but I don't like to let you go into town alone. There are always men hanging around in front of the stores and the saloons, and there is no telling what they might say."

"They won't say anything." Her black eyes sparkled. "Besides, I can take care of myself. It won't be the first time."

As Mrs. Armstrong looked at the tall, proud girl, she decided that her fears were rather absurd. Martha was nearly eighteen, and, as she said, quite capable of taking care of herself.

"You're right, I suppose," she sighed, weary with pain. "All right; go ahead. Saddle the bay mare and take my saddle. Yours is about ready to fall to pieces. Will you get some new wicks for the lamps, too, and—let's see—oh, yes, a five-pound bag of salt and a can of baking-powder?"

"Of course."

She put a fresh compress on Mrs. Armstrong's forehead and then went happily into her own room to dress. Going into Covelo alone was almost an adventure.

She saddled the bay mare, mounted into the side-saddle without assistance, and started for the village at a swift gallop. The dust was heavy, the glare of the sun blinding, and the midsummer heat so intense that it made her skin feel brittle dry; but she was used to Round Valley summers and thought

nothing of their discomforts. In fifteen minutes she had passed a few scattered houses and was in the heart of Covelo, which was composed of a few dozen dwellings, two stores, a two-story frame hotel, a tiny barber shop, and eight saloons. Nearly all of the business buildings were of only one story with a high front that was a weak simulation of a second story. All of them had porches, some of them four or five feet high.

Covelo, small though it was, was divided into two sections, Dog Town and Frog Town; the break was not sharply defined, and the only difference seemed to be that Dog Town could claim most of the saloons. The streets were not streets but roads that started somewhere in the valley and ended abruptly when they ran into a building or a fence. As Martha entered the village, she had to turn out to escape running over a mammoth sow that was nursing her litter in the middle of the road, and half a dozen dogs ran out of yards to yap at the heels of her horse.

She drew up at the store across from the town well, leaped lightly from the saddle, and looped the bridle-reins in an iron ring fastened in the porch for that purpose.

Eight or ten squaws were squatted on the porch, lazily letting the afternoon slip by. All of them had brilliantly colored bandanas on their heads; all of them wore dirty "wrappers"; all of them ex-

posed dusty bare feet from under their dresses; and, with only one exception, all of them had papooses in their laps. They looked like big fat lumps, their brown, heavy faces entirely without expression. As Martha tied her horse, one of the papooses began to cry. The mother mechanically opened her waist and brought the baby's mouth to her breast.

Martha paid no attention to her; neither did a couple of white men who were sitting on the edge of the porch quietly chatting: such sights were altogether too common to excite the slightest interest.

The men, however, looked at Martha. Her black calico riding skirt was two feet longer than her dress. She lifted it in heavy bunches with both hands and then hurried into the store. Her pink gingham dress, pale from much washing, was visible only in the waist, but the delicate pink emphasized the dull coloring of her face and her sloe-black eyes. Her hair was hidden by a broad-brimmed hat of coarse white straw with a band of black velvet ribbon around the crown. She was tightly corseted, and the smallness of her waist was made to seem more small by the heavy folds of the riding-skirt.

"Hell and damnation, Pete!" exclaimed one of the men. "Did you see that? Who in God's name is she?"

Peter Norton, a rotund young man with gray eyes and red cheeks, laughed. He worked in one of the saloons and knew all the town gossip.

"That girl's name is Martha Baker," he replied, "and she certainly is one hell of a pretty girl. And stuck up! Say, there ain't a man in town that 's got close enough to her to yell at her. She lives with Preacher Armstrong out on the reservation. Did n't you never see her before, Dan?"

"No. How could I when I ain't in town more 'n once in a coon's age. I've been herdin' cattle all over the county." Dan McLeod's voice was sullen.

"Heard you was goin' to work on the Updegraff place now," Norton remarked, the curiosity of a born gossip in his voice.

"Yeah, and thank God it's right here in town where a man can get a drink once in a while and deal a hand of poker. I want to know about that girl, though. What is she? Spanish? I never saw no one who looked like her."

"Naw, she ain't Spanish; she 's a half-breed."

"Half-breed!" Dan exclaimed incredulously.

"Sure. Her ma 's a full-blooded Pomo Injun. She 's livin' up in Summit Valley now with old Martin Colfax. I've heard Sam Perkins tell all about it. This girl's pa was up here before my time, but Sam knew him. Seems he was an Englishman. Nobody knew much about him, but Sam says that everybody thought he was a remittance-man; anyhow, he never done much work, and he always had plenty of money. The Armstrongs took this here

Martha when she was a little kid, and she's been with 'em ever since. Sure is purty."

"Sure is," Dan agreed absently as he rolled a cigarette and licked the paper with the tip of his tongue. He lighted the cigarette and puffed at it in silence, paying no attention to Norton's obvious curiosity.

Dan was a picturesque figure as he sat on the edge of the porch, idly smoking and kicking his heels; but he had no idea that he was picturesque, since the movies, which were to make the cowboys self-conscious, were still twenty-five years away.

He did not call himself a cowboy but a vaquero, and, like most of the other vaqueros in the valley, he was lean and hard; a tall young man with sandy, curly hair, clear-blue eyes, and a long crooked nose that seemed to twist his whole face askew. He wore white woolly chaps, not because he thought they looked well, but because they protected his legs when he rode through the brush. He had a vest cut out of cow's hide, the white and yellow hairs making a vivid pattern against his black shirt. It did not enter his mind that the red cotton bandana handkerchief knotted around his throat and the enormous gray Stetson on his head were effectively romantic. He wore the bandana because it protected his neck from the hot California sun and because it was handy to pull over his mouth when

he rode through the heavy dust. The Stetson hat was likewise a protection from the heat and the glare of the sun. Certainly Dan was picturesque, but fortunately he did n't know it.

A cloud of dust heralded the coming of some one around the corner, but six burros appeared before the man did.

Norton glanced at him and began to laugh.

"Hi, Jasper-eo Santer-eo," he cried. "How-eo are-eo you-eo?"

The man stopped and answered gravely, "Very-o well-eo."

He was Joseph Santer, a strange creature who had wandered into the valley from no one knew where. He was tall and superbly proportioned, his huge shoulders bulging heavily under his fringed doeskin jacket. His trousers, also made of doeskin, were likewise heavily fringed. He had made the suit himself, and the tailoring was expert. Over each shoulder hung a large braid of hair, copper gold, and his mustaches of the same color almost touched his chest. Except for his doeskin suit, he might have stepped straight off a viking ship a thousand years before. Some unaccountable twist in his brain made him chant his sentences in a tenor singsong and add "o" or "eo" to nearly every word.

When he stopped, the burros sought the shade of the porch and waited quietly.

"Where have you been, Jasper-eo?" Norton asked.

"In-eo the mountains-o," Jasper replied, fondling his long braids. He made his living by wandering about among the settlers in the mountains, taking orders from them for supplies, which he bought in Covelo, packed them on his burros, and then retraced his route making deliveries. His procedure when in Covelo was always the same: he immediately bought the supplies and left them with the merchant. With the money that remained he drank himself into a stupor. When he recovered, he got drunk again if he had any money; if he was broke, he packed the burros and departed for the mountains.

"Been up Summit Valley way?" Norton saw an opportunity to collect some gossip, and he never let one slip.

"Yes-eo."

"See Martin Colfax?"

"Yes-eo." Jasper, continuing to play with his braids, looked at Martin with a childlike stare. Dan threw the butt of his cigarette into the road and listened casually to the conversation. His mind was on Martha.

"Colfax is livin' with a squaw, ain't he?" Norton demanded. "Seems like I heard he was. Got a lotta kids, too."

Jasper suddenly became excited. "Yes-eo!" he

chanted. "Five-eo. Susie talked-o to me-eo. She said-eo that she-eo had a baby-eo named Martha-eo. She wanted-eo to know-eo if I-eo had-eo seen her-eo. Do you-eo know-eo Martha-eo?"

"Sure-eo," returned Norton flippantly. "See that hoss? Well, that 's Martha's. She ain't much of a baby now, though. Matter of fact, she 's a hell of a purty girl, and she 's in the store right now. You go in and you can see her."

Jasper, his excitement gone as quickly as it had come, sang, "Thanks-eo," leaped easily upon the porch, and hurried into the store.

"There," said Norton to McLeod; "I tol' you so. That squaw Susie is Martha's mother. She 's lived with Colfax for years, but she lived with this here Baker before Colfax took up with her. I don't know how Martha come to live with the Armstrongs, but she 's lived with 'em ever since I been here, and that 's eight years."

Just then Martha came out of the store holding her bundles in one hand and her riding-skirt bunched in the other. She let the skirt fall to the porch when she put the bundles in the saddle-bags, and then, untying the reins from the ring, she threw them over the horse's head, lifted her skirt with her free hand and put her left foot in the stirrup as she lifted her right knee over the curved saddle-horn. When she turned the horse away from the porch, Dan leaped to his feet and ran quickly to her.

"Wait a minute," he cried, catching hold of the bridle. Norton watched the scene eagerly, but the rest of the conversation was so softly spoken that his curiosity remained unsatisfied.

Martha sat calmly on the horse and looked at Dan. "What do you want?" she asked quietly.

"I want to know you," he replied, his voice low and intense. His blue eyes, burning like the tip of a flame, frightened her.

"Let go of my bridle, please." Her voice trembled slightly.

He obeyed, but as she started the horse, she heard McLeod say determinedly, "I 'm coming out to see you."

She did not answer, and he stood before the store watching her as she rode at a full gallop down the street, the heavy dust soon blurring her into vagueness.

Norton laughed. "Got stung, did n't you, Dan?" he called.

Dan reached him in three angry strides. "Shut your damn mouth," he said fiercely, "or I 'll put a hole in yuh."

Norton quailed before his fury, and his red cheeks paled. "Aw, don't get sore, Dan," he pleaded pacifyingly. "I did n't mean nothin'. Come on over and have a drink on me."

"All right, but you keep that damn gab of yours closed. Don't you say nothin' to nobody about me

and that girl, 'cause if you do you 're goin' to talk yourself plumb dead."

"I ain't goin' to say nothin'. Come on; let's get that drink. I'm dry."

Martha did not mention her encounter with McLeod to Mrs. Armstrong, assuring herself that her foster-mother was too ill to be worried, and, besides, the whole affair was nothing at all. Those burning blue eyes were before her every instant, however, as she prepared supper. She saw them when Mr. Armstrong said grace; she saw them as the meal progressed; she saw them when she washed the dishes—she saw them constantly, and the fire in them made her tremble. After she had finished the dishes, she tiptoed into Mrs. Armstrong's room to see if she could do anything for her. The good woman was sound asleep with her husband keeping watch; so Martha tiptoed out again and sought the front porch where she could think undisturbed. She sat still a few minutes and then rose slowly to her feet and walked down the path to the gate. It was getting dark, and not a cloud of dust could she see anywhere. Where was he, anyhow? He had said that he was coming.

She leaned on the gate and for the hundredth time thought over the meeting that afternoon. She remembered how light his mustaches were, how white his skin despite his sunburn, how blue his eyes. He was so white—as white as her father.

So tall and straight, too, a strong man. . . . She could feel his arms around her—tighter, tighter. . . .

The sound of a galloping horse startled her out of her reverie. She stared into the fast-gathering darkness and made out a rider just turning the bend in the road a hundred yards away. She started to turn and go into the house, but she seemed to have no strength to move; she stood rigidly still, dizzy with fear and wonder.

The rider drew up at the gate, leaped from his horse, slipped the reins over the animal's head, and, holding them in his hand, walked straight to Martha.

"There you are," he said softly in his deep voice. "I hoped you'd be out here. I kinda hated to talk to old man Armstrong."

Martha moved a step back from the gate, a slender, terrified girl who did not know what to say, who felt that she ought to leave this man and could n't leave him. Suppose Mr. Armstrong had heard him ride up. . . What would he say?

"I've got to go in," she murmured, knowing full well that she would n't.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he exclaimed, leaning over the gate and peering at her. "No, you don't! You must n't. Listen, Martha. You've gotta listen," he added as she turned as if to go in the house. She paused at the urgency in his voice.

"Don't go in," he pleaded; "don't go in. You won't, will you?"

His fear gave her courage. "I don't know who you are," she said shyly. "I must n't talk to you like this."

"Yes, you must. I'm Dan McLeod. I'm a vaquero, and I'm workin' on the Updegraff place now brandin' cattle. When we're through with that, I'm goin' to work on the farm. Listen, Martha; we can't talk here—and I gotta talk to yuh. Come with me while I tie my hoss to that tree down yonder, and then we can talk. Please come."

She could scarcely see him in the darkness, but there was a blur of white that she knew was his face. The vibrant low voice played on her irresistibly, but even greater than the man's appeal was her fear that Mr. Armstrong might hear them. She moved slowly through the gate as Dan held it open and walked beside him through the open field until they came to a sapling oak, to which Dan tied his horse.

Once free of the horse, Dan took her hand and led her deeper into the field. The warm clasp of his hand thrilled and frightened her, but she could no more have taken her own away than if it had grown to his. A pulse was throbbing in her throat so fiercely that it seemed as if she could not breathe. This man—this white man . . .

They moved into the black shadow of a tree, and Dan stopped. "Martha," he whispered tensely. "Martha, you little beauty." His hand pressed hers until she almost cried with pain and ecstasy; then he relaxed his fingers and moved close to her. As she felt his nearness, the night seemed to drown her senses; her heart throbbed so violently that it hurt.

"Martha!" The word burst from him, and the next instant his arms were around her, crushing her, hurting her wonderfully. He kissed her until she lay limp in his arms, beaten by his passion. Then he began to whisper in her ear, softly, insinuatingly.

Gradually his words found meaning in her mind, and as she realized what he was saying, what he was asking, shame and anger brought her stiffly erect. She tore herself from his arms and stood before him quivering with rage.

"You dirty beast!" she whispered fiercely. "You dirty beast!" As he moved urgently toward her, her voice rose. "Don't you dare touch me! Don't you dare!"

"Aw, Martha," he remonstrated, and put his hand on her shoulder. Instantly she turned into an avenging outraged fury; she struck at him wildly, clawing his cheeks, slapping at him, pommeling his face and chests with her fists.

"Here!" he cried. "Here, you wil' cat; stop that!" Deftly he caught her wrists and held them still. She trembled furiously in his grasp and

struggled to free herself, but, strong though she was, she was helpless before his strength. When she began to kick at his shins, he stepped back, still holding her wrists, however, and objected.

"Look here, Martha," he urged; "and hold your hosses. I 'm goin' to let you go, but I 'm goin' to tell you somethin' first. You and me ain't done yet. You 're goin' to belong to me, and don't you forget it."

The instant he released her wrists she leaned forward and slapped him with all her strength across his cheek; then, terrified, she ran wildly across the field to the house. Once there, she hid in the woodshed until she felt that she was calm enough to face the Armstrongs.

"Time you were in bed, Martha," said Mr. Armstrong when she came into the dining-room, where he was busily writing a sermon. He had been so interested in the sermon that he had not noticed her absence, and when he made no comment on it Martha refrained from offering an explanation. Mrs. Armstrong, he told her, was asleep; so Martha bade him good night and retired to her own room.

Not to sleep, however. All night long she tossed from one side of the bed to the other thinking of Dan McLeod, of his terrible strength, those crushing arms around her; and when she thought of his embrace, she hugged herself until her arms ached. She could feel his kisses, so fierce that they had

bruised her lips. "Dan, Danny . . ." she whispered.

At the thought of his words, those nasty, insinuating phrases, her whole body flushed with shame. And so the night went on, shame alternating with desire, love with hate.

In the darkness she could see his clear blue eyes, his sandy mustache, and his white face—so white. . . . A white man—and he loved her. She knew he did. He was white, white as her father—and he loved her. . . .

CHAPTER VI

FOR two weeks Martha did not speak to McLeod, although she saw him every night. Mrs. Armstrong's headache had proved merely the forerunner of a nervous breakdown, and the doctor insisted that she remain in bed. Her sickness made two great changes in Martha's life; she had to go into Covelo alone repeatedly, and she played the organ in the white people's church. The first change made it necessary for her to meet all the tradesmen in the village, and the second, she felt, altered her whole social status; she had won her place among her own kind. She did not know that half a dozen members of the church had protested to Mr. Armstrong after the first service for which she played.

They came to him in a group.

"Reverend Armstrong," said the spokesman, John Kerwin, a well-to-do farmer with a wrinkled face, pale-blue eyes, and a scraggly white beard; "Reverend Armstrong, I don't like that Martha Baker playin' the organ in our church. She belongs out on the Reservation. If you want to bring her here to the service, I s'pose that 's your business, but it ain't right for her to be playin' the organ."

His wife, a fat, positive woman with black hair and piggy eyes, pressed her thin lips into a tight line while he was speaking. When he finished, she clasped her hands over her bulging stomach and said acidly: "No, we don't like it. We ain't got to the place yet where we've got to have an Indian play our organ."

The self-appointed committee was composed of one other man and three women, and they joined Mr. Kerwin in murmuring agreement.

Mr. Armstrong's eyes flickered with anger, but his voice was soft, almost gentle, as he replied, "I don't think Jesus would mind." Then he turned and left the Sunday-school room, where the meeting had taken place, and sought Martha.

"Blas-*phee*-mous! That's what it is. Blas-*phee*-mous!" cried Mrs. Kerwin. "He ought to be ashamed of himself."

Her husband agreed with her, but one woman said positively that Mr. Armstrong was right, and, followed by three others, she left the room and the sanctity of the church to the indignant Kerwins.

Since Mr. Armstrong never told Martha anything about the protest, she did not dream that there had been one, and every Sunday evening she felt a thrill of pride when she sat down at the little reed-organ. On the fourth Sunday Mr. Armstrong asked her to sing a solo, and she happily assented. There was a little gasp of surprise when she turned from

the organ, rose to her feet, and faced the congregation. Mrs. Armstrong, still wan and trembly, played the accompaniment. At first the congregation felt that Mr. Armstrong was carrying this thing of forcing a half-breed on them altogether too far, but once more music proved its power to calm the savage breast. Martha had a really fine voice, a full soprano of great power and unusual range. No one in the little white church had ever heard singing like hers before, and the congregation were too much moved by the music to make any public protest about the blood of the singer.

As a matter of fact, Martha sang with an intensity and fervor new to her, and her foster-parents had been surprised at the splendor of her performance. She had felt quite calm when she left the organ, but while Mrs. Armstrong was playing the opening measures something drew her notice toward the last pews. She trembled when she saw Dan McLeod's blue eyes gazing fixedly at her, and for a moment her throat tightened so that she thought that she could not sing. Then she was swept by a surging exultation; she felt all-powerful, and she lifted her voice and sang to the glory of the Lord.

Dan, she was sure, had come to church merely to see her, and it was the recognition of that fact which had excited her into singing so superbly. She wondered as she sat down if she would see him after

the service, and she thought of the last time she had spoken to him, two long weeks before.

During the first days of Mrs. Armstrong's illness, Martha never left her bedside except to do the housework or make a necessary visit to Covelo. Night after night she sat by the sick woman's bed and looked out of the window, and every night she saw Dan McLeod walking by leading his horse.

One warm night she saw him pass. Mrs. Armstrong was asleep, and the little room was stifling; so she tiptoed carefully from the room and to the front porch to get a few whiffs of fresh air. Since Dan was nowhere in sight, she felt quite safe. For a time she sat in a rocking-chair thinking of him. The first violence of her passion was gone, and in its place had come a calm surety that this man was not only going to be her husband but her means of attaining salvation as well.

Her determination to be white and to be accepted by the white people as one of them had never wavered since her childhood, and by the time she was fifteen she had made up her mind to marry a white man, because such a marriage, she was positive, would establish her socially in Covelo. She might even be invited to join the Eastern Star. Now Dan McLeod had appeared, and she understood the morals of the valley too well to expect him to offer marriage if he could get her in any other way.

After her first anger had died down, she did not

blame him for his attitude, nor did she attempt to explain it; she merely took it for granted. She realized clearly that he considered her an Indian, and no white man worth looking at would marry a squaw. They lived with squaws, of course, but they did not marry them, and she was in entire sympathy with their point of view. Squaws were stupid and dirty. What decent white man would want to marry one? Well, she was n't a squaw, and she calmly made up her mind that she would show Mr. Daniel McLeod that she was n't.

As she sat on the porch comfortably rocking, she wondered just how she could accomplish her purpose. Tired of sitting, she got up and wandered down to the gate, idly letting her fingers touch the phlox blossoms that bordered the path. Dreamily she looked at the stars, such big, bright stars, so many, many of them speckling the black dome of the sky in sparkling patterns. The Milky Way was a great ragged cloud, white and dazzling, flung like an arch across the heavens. Somewhere a cricket was singing its monotonous crackly song, and she could hear a coyote howling mournfully in the hills behind her. A cow mooed. "Wants its calf, I guess," she thought lazily as she leaned on the gate. "Just listen to that bullfrog. It sounds like a duck with a sore throat." She smiled at the simile and sniffed eagerly as a light breeze brought the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle to her.

"What a pretty night!" she whispered, and because the night was so pretty and because she felt a plaintive happiness within her, she began to sing softly.

"Oh, my darling Nelly Gray,
They have taken you away,
And I 'll never see my darling any more.
They have taken you to Georgia
For to wear your life away—
So farewell to the old Kentucky shore."

She sang verse after verse, and when she finished the last one she lifted her weight reluctantly from the gate preparatory to going into the house.

"Don't go, Martha," a deep voice said out of the darkness under an oak-tree. "Don't go."

Frightened, she turned quickly, and there stood Dan McLeod behind her. "Don't go," he said again. "I want to talk to you."

His obvious humility gave her courage.

"I won't talk to you," she replied decisively. "You are n't fit to talk to."

"Oh, yes, I am. Listen, Martha; I'm sorry for what happened that night; honest I am; and I've come out here every night for two weeks to tell yuh so. To-night I tied my horse down in the gully yonder and come back, hopin' you'd come out sooner or later. I seen yuh sittin' on the porch, but I did n't dare come in. And then you come down

here to the gate and sang. Lord, you 've got a purty voice." He paused, and when she said nothing but stood still waiting, he added mournfully, "You ain't mad at me, are yuh, Martha?"

"Yes, I am," she answered with cold definiteness. "And I don't want you to come out here any more. If you think I'm going to meet you secretly like this, you are very much mistaken. What kind of a girl do you think I am? Good night." And with that she turned and walked rapidly into the house, proud and pleased. She knew that she had scored, and she felt positive that he would understand her remark about not meeting her secretly. If he was going to court her, he 'd have to do it openly; and when he had once presented himself with her in public, the battle was more than half won.

When she finished her solo in the church, she thought happily of that meeting. And now Dan had come to church to see her. . . . Would he talk to her? Would he dare? Would he ask to call? All through the service she wondered about him, and she could hardly wait for the benediction to be pronounced so that she could see what he would do.

After the service, Mr. Armstrong posted himself at the door and shook hands with the members of the congregation as they passed him. Mrs. Armstrong and Martha retired to the vestry. Finally every one had left but Dan. He walked up to the minister and held out his hand.

"I guess you don't know me, Mr. Armstrong," he said bluntly. "I'm Dan McLeod, and I'm workin' on the Updegraff place."

Mr. Armstrong grasped his hand firmly. "I'm glad to know you, Mr. McLeod, and I'm glad to see you at our church. I hope you will come often."

"I ain't much on goin' to church," Dan replied, a little shamefaced. "I ain't never been before, and I did n't come to-night to hear the service, neither." He tried to hide his embarrassment behind a boorish gruffness but did not entirely succeed.

"Well, what did you come for, then?" Mr. Armstrong asked with a laugh. "Certainly these pews are n't very comfortable, and I doubt if the church is so beautiful that you came to see it."

Dan grinned. "Naw, I did n't come to see the church, and those pews are certainly damned hard." He flushed up to his forehead. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"That's all right," Mr. Armstrong assured him, smiling at his confusion. "I've heard the word before, and I'm afraid that I've been guilty of using it myself. If I had to sit in one of those pews, I might use it more often. Come, tell me why you came to church. You have certainly aroused my curiosity."

Dan's blush deepened as he answered. He was only twenty-four, and the social amenities had not been part of his training. He looked miserably at

his shoes for a minute and then lifted his eyes and blurted out: "It's that Martha Baker. I want to meet her."

"Oh, I see!" Then he added dryly: "Well, I suppose you are n't the first man who has been led into a church and sometimes to salvation by a pretty girl. Come back into the vestry, and I'll introduce you."

Martha and Mrs. Armstrong looked up in surprise when Mr. Armstrong walked into the room followed by Dan. Martha had felt that something would happen, but when the obvious happened she was startled; nothing else would have surprised her.

"Jane," said Mr. Armstrong, "this is Mr. McLeod. Mr. McLeod, this is my wife, Mrs. Armstrong."

Mrs. Armstrong held out her hand and winced when Dan folded it firmly in his. "I'm very glad to meet you," she said brightly.

"Thanks," muttered Dan and released her hand.

"And this is Miss Baker," Mr. Armstrong announced with rather more than his usual formality.

"I'm very glad to meet you," murmured Martha, giving a very neat imitation of Mrs. Armstrong, but she did not offer her hand. She was afraid to.

"Thanks." Dan's blush was almost painful, and, for a naturally graceful man, his bow was inconceivably awkward.

There was a moment of embarrassing silence,

which Mr. Armstrong broke by saying pleasantly, "Mr. McLeod would like to call on Martha." He smiled at the girl. "I have no objection if you have n't."

A faint pink colored Martha's cheeks as she nodded her acquiescence. She had never seen Dan without a hat before, and she marveled at the whiteness of his forehead where the tan stopped. She had known that he was white like that, wonderfully white. She was thrilled by that band of white skin, and she was thrilled by her triumph. He was begging for permission to see her, but there was no hint of triumph in her shy nod, not the slightest suggestion that she had ever seen the man before—nothing but modest confusion.

Again there was an awkward silence, which Mr. Armstrong ended by saying abruptly: "Well, we must be getting along. Mrs. Armstrong is n't well, and she has been up much too late already. Would to-morrow night do for Mr. McLeod's call, Martha?"

"Yes," she replied softly, looking at the floor. "To-morrow night 's all right."

Mr. Armstrong turned to Dan and held out his hand. "To-morrow night it is. Come about eight. I'm very glad to have met you, and I hope you'll come to church again—for the service next time maybe. Take a few more chances, anyway; you might like it, you know. Good night."

Dan gripped his hand fervently and replied in a husky voice: "Good night. Maybe I will." Then to Martha and Mrs. Armstrong, "Good night."

"Good night," they said in unison and with varying thoughts as they watched him stumble through the door. Martha thought nothing of Dan's awkwardness, nothing of his social crudity. She had won; nothing else mattered. Mr. Armstrong thought that he didn't particularly like the boy's looks; his mouth and eyes were hard. And his wife found consolation in Dan's nose. "It's as absurd as mine," she thought, "but I don't like it. Mine's just funny, and his is wicked somehow. His nostrils look mean."

None of them, however, Martha least of all, guessed what that request for an introduction had cost Dan. It wasn't only the situation, which he had feared he would be unequal to, but the request itself was contrary to his code of ethics. Hell and damnation, a man didn't get introduced to a half-breed! When he left the vestry he was ashamed and humiliated, partly because he thought that he had acted like a clumsy fool, and partly because he had done something which he honestly did not believe was right or proper.

After his last conversation with Martha, he had patrolled the Armstrong yard for five nights and never got a glimpse of the girl; on the sixth night he got drunk. The seventh found him again be-

fore the house, peering hopefully into the darkness, again without success. For several nights following he drank himself into a stupor. But neither watching nor drunkenness brought any results; his desire for Martha would not down, and that desire was like a terrible, insistent hunger that gnawed at him unmercifully.

He was frightened. He had wanted girls before, had them often enough, but this emotion was something new. Martha's face haunted him—her black eyes; her delicate, proud nose; and, above all, her tempting, pink mouth. He could see her walking, so slender and erect, so tall and somehow so exquisite.

He put his carnal desires away; at least, he did not think of them as carnal: the girl awed him too much for that. But he felt that he must be near her, that he must touch her hand; he asked no more—just to touch her hand. When he lay on his uncomfortable cot tossing and twisting in his agony, he could see that hand stretching out to him in the darkness, but he dared not reach for it; he knew that it would vanish.

Then the realization would come to him that this was a half-breed girl who was torturing him by day and turning him into a restless, sleepless animal at night—a half-breed Injun! When that thought came, he trembled with rage. The she-devil! The dirty squaw! What a damned fool he was

to get all worked up over a common squaw! Hell, there were plenty of other squaws—the reservation was full of 'em—and he could have 'em for the askin'; yes, and squaws with eyes just as black, too. But not slim like Martha; no, and not with pink lips and with a straight pretty nose, nor with a small waist like hers. Oh, he could almost span her waist with his two hands; he knew he could! The other squaws had dark, greasy skins and great lumpy breasts; and Martha was—well, not white, but, damn it, she was as light complected as most folks, and she was so slim—like a sapling *madroña*. He thought of the night he had held her in his arms. There was something so firm about her, so strong—and yet so soft and gentle, too. She had swayed against him and trembled. . . . “Oh, my God, my God!”

Night after night he tortured himself with thoughts like these, and neither liquor nor hard work would bring him sleep. At last he thought of going to church, not to meet her—that was an afterthought—but just to look at her. At first he had been disappointed when he found her sitting at the organ, her back to the congregation. When she rose to sing his heart leaped with delight; and when she sang, his prejudice melted in the flame of his desire. It was her singing that made him seek Mr. Armstrong and ask for an introduction.

He had to speak to her before the evening was over if he sold his soul for the opportunity.

He did n't feel that he had done quite that, but he did feel that he had humiliated himself shamefully. And suppose some of the boys found out that he had been to church. They 'd josh hell out of him. "Damn their souls; let 'm try it," he muttered to himself. "I 'll shet 'em up all right; I 'll shet 'em up with a hunk of lead."

When he thought of his humiliation, his rage rose against Martha, but when he thought of the fact that he was going to see her the next night, that he was going to talk with her, perhaps touch her—then his rage was drowned in a flood of ecstasy.

That Sunday night when he went to bed he tried once more to see her standing on the low rostrum singing, but the picture evaded him. "Martha," he murmured, "Martha. . . ." Then, smiling happily, he went to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

DAN'S first call was hardly a success. In the first place, he decided that he had to dress up, and when he put on his Sunday clothes he felt entirely miserable—and looked worse. The black suit did not fit him, and his fine body was made ludicrous by the tight trousers and short jacket. Long, pointed shoes were the fashion, and Dan's toes, which were used to plenty of room, cramped and ached in their narrow confinement. He had sense enough not to wear a "choker" collar, but the soft collar on his bright blue shirt revealed a band of white neck that was usually concealed by the red bandana handkerchief; and that band of white, together with the one on his forehead, emphasized the tan of his face into a brick red.

Furthermore, he was not used to sitting in a parlor carrying on a polite conversation. He had never talked to girls about anything but their charms, and such talk was exceedingly difficult of accomplishment with Martha sitting primly across the room making shy replies to his clumsy advances. Out of the kindness of their hearts, the Armstrongs had at once retired to the dining-room, but with their going the conversation lapsed into a series of

jerky remarks that seemed to fall to the floor with a dull thud. Dan looked miserably at the flowered carpet, at three crayon portraits of Mrs. Armstrong's relatives on the walls, at the square piano, at the black marble clock, and at the iron statuette on it that masqueraded unsuccessfully as bronze, at the large print of Landseer's "Stag at Bay," at anything and everything, even at the books, but he could find inspiration nowhere. The horsehair chair on which he sat was hard and slippery, and bits of hair, scratchy as burrs, found their way through the seat of his trousers. The heavy white antimacassar on the back of the chair slipped up and down as he wriggled uncomfortably, making the chair feel twice as slippery and dangerously unstable.

Martha asked him about his work on the Updegraff place, about the rumor that the Baptists were going to build a new church, and about the cattle-rustling war that was going on in the mountains. Dan gave her the desired information with terse directness, much as if he were making a report before an investigating committee. Finally, in desperation, he asked her to sing. She went quietly to the piano and picked up a bulky volume of music, "Songs for the Home."

"Would you like 'Juanita'?" she asked, turning on the stool.

"Yeah; that's pretty."

"All right." She noticed him sliding down on the chair. "I don't think you are very comfortable. Why don't you try that green chair? It's fine."

Dan accepted the suggestion with alacrity. The faded green plush chair proved to be not only comfortable but safe as well, since its antimacassar was firmly pinned and did not slide nervously up and down. He relaxed happily while Martha sang "Juanita." When she finished it, he asked her to sing some more; so she sang "My Darling Nelly Gray," "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground," "Old Black Joe," and "Swanee River." Dan was deeply impressed by her musical ability. Playing the piano seemed to him an uncanny accomplishment, and when he awkwardly said so, she laughed and replied:

"I can't play it very well; besides, I'd lots rather play the guitar."

Dan's blue eyes opened wide in awe, and for an instant even his nose seemed less sinister, so child-like was his face with wonderment. "Can you play the guitar, too?" Her accomplishments were almost too much for him. He had never seen such a woman.

"Oh, yes. I'll play it and sing—let's see, what shall I sing? How about 'When You and I Were Young, Maggie'? Do you like that?"

"Yeah; that's good."

She lifted the guitar from the top of the piano

and tuned it; then she turned on the piano-stool and faced him as she let her fingers slip over the frets in a few opening chords. She knew perfectly how well she looked in the soft lamplight bending over the guitar, and she knew how intently Dan was watching her, but she kept her eyes modestly down-cast and sang softly as if she did not dare let her voice out.

Dan heaved an admiring sigh when she thrummed the last chord. "Gosh, you sure can sing!" he exclaimed breathlessly, his voice weighted with admiration. "Do you know 'Silver Threads among the Gold'? There's a vaquero I know, Billy Cutler, that sings that great. But he ain't as good a singer as you."

Martha acknowledged the compliment with a shy smile and began to play softly. Dan, like most simple, very masculine men, was extremely sentimental on occasion, and "Silver Threads among the Gold" never failed to dampen his eyes. The combination of Martha's beauty and her singing of his favorite song quite unmanned him; he was incapable of saying anything when she finished the sad ballad and put the guitar back on the piano.

"It's a pretty song," she remarked, hoping to break the embarrassing silence.

"Yeah."

Again the silence. Martha had successfully hidden her confusion all evening, but the quiet and

Dan's worshiping blue eyes were too much for her; she looked at her lap, and a soft pink crept stealthily up her cheeks.

Finally Dan stirred restlessly in the green chair and muttered: "Guess I'd better go. Must be all of nine o'clock." He rose to his feet and watched Martha narrowly as she stood up too. What to do next was an unsolvable conundrum, and Martha's manner suggested no hint to him. When a fellow called on a girl he kissed her good night, and he had hoped that he might complete his call with that natural amenity. Martha gave no sign, however, that she expected or desired any such compliment, and her quiet formality made it impossible for him even to attempt the usual preliminaries.

He moved slowly to the door.

"I've gotta be goin'. Good night." He held out his hand, and Martha placed hers lightly in it. As his began to tighten, she slowly withdrew her hand and murmured:

"Good night. Call again some time."

Dan had felt rebuked by the withdrawal of her hand, but her invitation sent his spirits soaring. "Can I come to-morrow night?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course not! That would n't be nice." He wilted before her prim answer, and his despair was complete when she added, "You must n't come for another week."

"A week!" Horror-stricken, he stared at her, a cowed and beaten man who had completely forgotten that this girl was a half-breed, and he felt no sense of shame as he pleaded for an earlier engagement.

"Aw, not a whole week! Let me come Wednesday night."

"That 's prayer-meeting night, and I've got to play the organ."

"Thursday night?"

"No, Zamloch is going to be at White's Hall Thursday night, and I'm going. I just love Zamloch. I don't see how he does his tricks. Do you remember last year when he was here? He put a basket on two wooden horses and got in it. Then he pulled down the cover, and Mr. Jones and Mr. Keever rushed to the basket and pulled up the lid. There was n't a thing in it. And just then Zamloch came in the front door laughing. Did you see it?"

"No; I was up in the mountains then. Well, will you let me come Friday night?"

"It's awfully soon." Martha's voice was low in shy hesitation.

Her shyness—at least her excellent imitation of shyness—made Dan bold and masterful. "I'll be here Friday night," he announced positively. Once more he held out his hand. "Good night."

Martha did not seem to see the hand. "All right, then," she agreed; "Friday night. Good night, Mr. McLeod."

All evening both of them had refrained from calling each other by name, and Martha's final "Mr. McLeod" put that young gentleman in his place far more definitely and effectively than tearing strips of skin from his face had done.

The succeeding visits were less strained and uncomfortable, but they were far from intimate. True, Martha consented after considerable persuasion to call him Dan and to permit him to call her Martha, and she gradually allowed him to increase the number of his visits to four or five a week, but she held him successfully away from any attempts at love-making, and he always had to be content with a cool hand-shake when he departed.

Nothing went unnoticed in Covelo, and it soon became known that Dan McLeod was "sparkin' that breed girl, Martha Baker"; but no one dared to make any remarks to Dan. Covelo was effectively shut away from civilization; revolvers were casually carried and casually used. Dan's trigger-finger was known to be nervous and his eye accurate; so there was plenty of talk in the saloons about him—when he was n't within hearing.

The Covelo people gossiped happily, but the Armstrongs were seriously worried. Mrs. Armstrong's health had not improved, and her husband

had asked to be transferred to another church. He had been promised a temporary pastorate in Alameda, and they expected to leave Covelo before the early snows set in, by Thanksgiving at the latest.

They did not approve of Dan McLeod—Mr. Armstrong's inquiries about him had been far from satisfactory—and his intentions were obviously serious. They did not want to leave Martha in the valley, and they earnestly did not want to let her marry McLeod; yet they knew that they could not afford to take her with them.

They talked it over one night in July when Dan was with Martha in the parlor. As usual, they were in the dining-room.

"What are we going to do about Martha, Jane?" Mr. Armstrong asked, closing his book and laying it on the red cotton table-cloth.

Mrs. Armstrong stitched for some time at her sewing before she replied. "I don't know, Jim," she said slowly at last; "I honestly don't know. I've worried a lot ever since McLeod has been calling on her, but I don't know what to do." Her big brown eyes looked anxiously across the table at him; even her pug nose seemed less jaunty than usual. "I don't dare say anything to her. To tell you the truth, I've been a little afraid of Martha ever since she's been with us. No one could ask for a more obedient girl, but I've always had a feeling that

she was obedient because I 've never asked her to do anything that she has n't wanted to do. She 's lived with us eleven years, but I don't really know her at all. She has never confided in me. Do you remember when you heard about that Indian boy who tried to attack her? What was his name, anyway?"

"Claud Madison."

"Yes, that was it. Don't these Indians get the most wonderful names? Well, she apparently nearly scratched that boy's eyes out, but she has never mentioned him to me, never said a word about the whole affair. She keeps everything that matters to herself. I don't dare say anything to her about McLeod. Do you think that he wants to marry her?"

"I think that he is crazy about her," Mr. Armstrong responded soberly, "but he won't marry her if he can help it. I've seen too much of these people up here to have much faith in his good intentions. If Martha were white he would n't dare come near her; he 'd call her a lady and be scared to death to speak to her. But she 's a half-breed; so he thinks that he is better than she is and that he is condescending to call. I'm afraid, though, that he will ask to marry her and that she will accept him. He 's common as dirt. He 's been mixed up with a lot of squaws one time or another—that I know—and he's an inveterate drinker and gambler,

too. He's always in the saloons when he is n't working. The man's an ignorant vaquero, but he's white; and I'm afraid that that is all that will matter to Martha."

"Yes," his wife agreed; "I'm afraid it is. She's eighteen years old, and she's never had a beau before; and she is far and away the prettiest girl in the valley. She has n't had a chance, of course, to meet white men, and she won't look at anybody that has a scrap of Indian blood in him. Bert Cummings is only a quarter-breed, and he's a good, steady, hard-working young fellow. I've seen him try to make up to Martha time and time again, but she simply would n't pay any attention to him at all. He's a fine-looking man, too, and I know that he's making good money. If what you've heard about McLeod is half true, Bert is worth ten of him; and Bert's got less Indian blood in him than Martha has herself."

Mr. Armstrong shook his head ruefully. "That's true enough, but Martha would n't look at him if he were only one fiftieth Indian. She pretends to herself that she's white—you know that as well as I do—and I'm perfectly sure that she's made up her mind to marry a white man. Nothing that we can say will make any difference, either. She does n't care whether McLeod is good, bad, or indifferent; he's white—and that's all that matters to her

now. But think what a life she will lead if she marries him! Can't you talk to her, Jane?"

She paused while she threaded her needle and then answered definitely: "No. No, I don't dare. I've never once mentioned her Indian blood to her, and she's never mentioned it to me. I have a feeling that she thinks that she will be white if she marries a white man, and she won't believe me if I tell her that she won't be—and that the whites won't think that she is, either. We'll have to manage to take her with us some way, Jim, though I don't know how we are going to do it."

"I don't see how we can." He tapped his book with nervous fingers. "We simply won't have the money, and you've got to have a month or two in a sanitarium; that's all there is to it. Well, let's wait a few weeks and see what happens before we make any plans. Maybe McLeod will tire of her, though what good that will do in the end I don't know. We can't leave her here in the valley alone, and I don't see how we can take her with us. It's a hard problem," he concluded despairingly.

Martha, however, did not find the problem particularly hard, and she solved it to her complete satisfaction. It took her three months to complete Dan's subjugation, but in the end she won. He had been calling on her for two months before he even thought of marriage, but the girl's attraction for him was irresistible, and it finally became plain to

him that marriage was the only means of securing her. At first he had n't even thought of her as chaste—he never thought of any woman as chaste—but as the days passed, the idea slowly crept into his head that the one time he had kissed her was the only time she had ever been kissed. That idea made her infinitely more desirable, so desirable that his determination to possess her was exalted at last into an unconsciously obscene crusade.

Martha understood his attitude as well as if he had explained it in careful detail, and she admired him for it. His pride, she thought, was splendid and right; of course, no right-thinking white man would marry a half-breed if he could get her any other way. She was quite cold-blooded in her consideration of the problem. Her first passion had cooled as quickly as it had been aroused, and although she felt a certain excitement when Dan was near her she was never overwhelmed by it. His splendid masculine strength and his obvious ardor naturally exercised a strong appeal, but she did not hunger for him when he was away. Dan to her was not a romantic lover; he was simply a means to an end. She closed her eyes neither to his illiteracy nor to his probable dissipation, but she looked on them as unfortunate necessities. She did not expect to get a man like Mr. Armstrong; such men did not abound in Round Valley.

When the thought of marriage finally occurred

to Dan, he put it from him with disgust. "Marry a breed? Hell, no!" Furthermore, he had no desire to get married, even to a white woman. What would he do with a wife, anyway? And nothing seemed more stupid to him than a life of domesticity. He assured himself that he'd never tie himself down to a wife and a lot of kids; not by a jugful!

He had taken it for granted that Martha would eventually succumb to his wooing, but when she continued to remain chastely reserved, and as his desire grew with his repeated visits, his objections to marriage melted. He had to have her at any price. "What th' hell 's the difference?" he asked of the darkness as he lay in bed trying to reach a decision. "A man's got to get married some time or other; and Martha's got any other girl round her licked seven ways for Sunday. S'pose she has got some Injun in her. That don't make no difference." And as the vision of her slender body, her pale dark face with its pink lips and black eyes rose before him, he decided definitely to marry her. It never occurred to him that she might prove unwilling.

He called the next night, and after Martha had sung for him and they had gossiped meaninglessly for an hour, he rose to go. "Walk down to the gate with me, will yuh, Martha?" he asked. "I've got somethin' to say to yuh."

Ordinarily Martha would have rejected his invitation, but somehow she divined what he wanted; so she rose and followed him through the door and down the steps. He walked slowly to the gate and then turned to her.

"Martha, girl," he said softly, "I want to ask yuh somethin'."

"Yes?" she breathed almost inaudibly—and waited.

The moon was full, and as it shone on Martha her beauty grew on Dan until his voice choked in his throat. His eyes gleamed hungrily, and his breathing became labored.

"Martha," he pleaded, his voice a trembling whisper; "Martha, I've gotta have yuh. Will you marry me? Will yuh, Martha?"

For an instant she hesitated. For the first time she was afraid. Then she looked up at him, and his face was so white in the moonlight—so white.

"Yes, Dan." Her voice trembled pitifully. "Yes, Dan."

He took her in his arms with rough ardor and kissed her so fiercely that she was frightened. "Don't, Dan," she begged; "please don't"; but that first kiss and the nearness of her body had inflamed him beyond hearing. He kissed her again and again, like a man who, starved almost to death, has suddenly found food. Finally, terrified, she put her hands against his chest and pushed him back.

"You must n't, Danny," she whispered; "you must n't. You hurt me. Please don't."

Dan, drunk with desire and unheeding, tightened his arms.

"Stop it!" Her voice was sharply decisive. "Stop it, Dan! If this is the way you're going to act, I won't marry you."

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I just could n't help it. I go plumb crazy when I'm round yuh. You ain't really mad, are yuh?"

"No, not very; but I don't want you to kiss me that way. You hurt, and you scare me, too."

Dan grinned. "You've scared me worser 'n I'll ever scare you." His arms were still about her, but he loosened them until his embrace was almost tender. "Will you marry me right away, Martha? I can't wait very long."

Martha immediately became hesitant and demure.

"Oh, not right away, Danny!" she protested. "I could n't."

"Why not?"

"Why, I've got all my clothes to make, and I've got to help Mrs. Armstrong pack. You know they're going away in a month. And—and—well, there's everything to do."

Dan laughed. "Aw, you're just stallin'. You can make your duds after we're married, and you can help Mrs. Armstrong pack, too." Then he was

dazzled by a brilliant idea. "You want Mr. Armstrong to marry us, don't yuh?"

"Of course!"

"Well, how 's he goin' to do it if he don't do it right away?"

"That 's so." Martha lowered her head in thought. Then she looked questioningly up at him.

"In two weeks, Danny?"

"It 's a long time to wait, but I guess if I 've gotta wait that long, I 've gotta; that 's all Now kiss me good night."

Fearful of frightening her again, he drew her gently to him; and, for the first time since the night she had met him, a real passion for the man flamed in her. She twined her arms around his neck and turned her face up eagerly. The emotion that his kiss aroused in her frightened her more than the brutality of his passion had, and she drew her lips away.

"Good night, Danny dearest," she whispered, pressing her cheek against his.

His reply was another kiss. Then he was out of the gate and making across the road to the tree where he had tied his horse. He slipped a leather blind down over the horse's eyes, drew the cinch tight, twisted the tie-rope over the saddle-horn, and mounted quickly into the saddle. The horse bucked, but Dan turned to wave his hand at Martha before

he leaned forward to pull up the blind. Instantly the horse tore down the road in a wild run.

For a time Martha leaned against the gate and looked at the moon, but not thinking; those last kisses of Dan's had dulled her mind beyond thought. Nothing was left but a sweet thrill that made her press her palms to her burning cheeks and bite her lips to stop their trembling.

She stood by the gate for half an hour, but, finally, once more composed and sure of herself, she turned and went into the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE Armstrongs were as usual in the dining-room, both of them reading. They were sitting at the table, the oil-lamp with its white shade painted with pink roses between them. Mrs. Armstrong looked up as Martha entered.

"Dan gone?" she asked, and put a slip of paper in her book as she closed it.

"Yes. Yes, he's gone."

Her usually calm eyes were shining brightly, and there was a restraint in her manner that warned Mrs. Armstrong.

"I thought that I heard you go out to the gate with him," she remarked casually. "It must be a beautiful night."

"It is." And as Mr. Armstrong looked up from his book, she added softly, "He asked me something."

"To marry him?" There was fear in Mrs. Armstrong's voice, but Martha did not notice it.

"Yes. . . . And I said I would."

Mr. Armstrong glanced questioningly at his wife, and when she nodded slightly, he turned in his chair and spoke gently to the girl.

"Draw up a chair to the table, won't you, Martha? Jane and I want to talk to you."

He waited until she was seated between them; then he began, his voice low and serious:

"You've lived with us eleven years, Martha, and we've come to love you very much. You seem almost like our own child to us, and your happiness means as much to us as if you were our own child. You know that, don't you?"

Martha nodded but did not look at him; she kept her eyes fixed defensively on the table-cloth. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap, but her face was calmly expressionless.

"We've tried very hard to make you happy, and I think that you have been happy with us," he continued gently. "Now you are about to take a step that we are afraid will mean unhappiness for you. We love you too much, my child, to lie to you and tell you that we are glad about your engagement. We were afraid it was coming, and we have often talked about the possibility with real fear. I have made inquiries about Dan McLeod, and, frankly, Martha, I don't think that he is a good man; not good enough for you, anyway."

He paused, but as Martha continued to gaze at the table-cloth and say nothing, he glanced at his wife dubiously. Encouraged by the assurance of her nod, he went on:

"I think that I ought to tell you that there are

some nasty stories about him in Covelo. He is said to have had numerous affairs with Indian women; he is a hard drinker—you must have smelled liquor on his breath many times; and he gambles continuously. I doubt if he makes enough money to support a wife decently, and you will probably have to earn your own living.”

Martha looked up for the first time. “I can do that if I have to,” she said proudly; “I can sew and cook.”

“Yes, I know, my dear, and that’s what put a plan in our heads. . . . You are n’t angry with me for saying this, are you?”

“No, I’m not angry,” she answered softly.

“I did n’t think you would be. You know that I am saying it because we are fond of you and not to make you unhappy.” He paused, carefully selecting his words. “When we found that we were going to leave the valley, we wondered what we were going to do about you. We did n’t feel that we could leave you here, and yet we did n’t exactly see how we could afford to take you with us—my salary is so small, you know. And I’ll be getting less without the government pay. Well, Jane and I talked about it and talked about it, and finally we decided that we must take you with us. It was the realization that you were a woman grown and that you were capable of earning your own living that decided us. We can easily get work for you through

the people in my church; and while you will live with us, you will be independent. Won't that be better than spending the rest of your life in Covelo?"

But Martha wanted nothing better than to spend the rest of her life in Covelo. She had inherited her pride, her musical ability, and her love for everything beautiful from her father, but she had not inherited his wanderlust. Round Valley was her world, and to leave it would be to go into the outer darkness. To conquer the people of Covelo and make them acknowledge her as an equal; that was her sole ambition.

"I don't want to go," she murmured; "I'm going to get married."

"But," burst in Mrs. Armstrong, ignoring Martha's last remark, "you don't know what you will be missing. Think of it, Martha, all the things that you have never seen. I want to see your face when you light an electric light for the first time. All you do is turn a little black thing, and there's the light. Or if we have gas, you turn a little cock and strike a match. No more filling lamps with coal-oil and washing them and putting in new wicks. And running water. Just think of that, Martha. You don't have to pump and pump and pump. You turn a handle, and the water comes; and if you want hot water, you just turn another handle. You'll ride on the trains. Martha, you're eighteen years old, and you've never seen a train. Oh, good-

ness me, I can hardly think of all the things you'll see: there's ferry-boats—why, Martha Baker, you've never seen a boat in your life, not even a rowboat, and these ferry-boats go all by themselves and carry hundreds of people. Yes, and you'll see the street-cars and elevators and sky-scrapers and the Palace Hotel and the Cliff House and San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean and everything in the world! Of course, you'll go with us!"

Martha's eyes had opened wide at Mrs. Armstrong's list of wonders. She was impressed, but she was more impressed by the memory of Dan's kisses. Maybe she'd go to San Francisco after she was married and see all those things for herself. She could have Dan and the wonders, too.

"I've promised Dan." Her voice was soft, but there was something definite in it that made Mr. Armstrong glance despairingly at his wife. Martha saw the glance, so added by way of consolation, "I'll come down below some time and see you." "Down below" in Northern California meant San Francisco.

"But," Mrs. Armstrong protested, "are you sure that you will be happy with Dan? Are you sure that he loves you?"

Martha thought of his kisses and smiled when she answered: "Yes, he loves me. I know he is n't perfect, but he's as good as most men." There was real affection in her eyes as she looked at Mr.

Armstrong and said simply: "There are n't many like you. Besides, Dan won't lead such a wild life after he gets married." She saw the doubt in their faces, and, excited by it to defense, she came nearer to mentioning her Indian blood than she ever had before. "He loves me all right; he would n't ask to marry me if he did n't." And despite the suggested admission, there was triumph in her voice.

The Armstrongs were beaten. They could not answer Martha's last argument without venturing on territory that they dared not tread. It was all too evident that she was determined to marry McLeod, and they knew her too well to hope to break her determination.

The silence hung heavy for a time. Finally Mr. Armstrong lifted it by saying soberly: "We did n't want to hurt your feelings, Martha, and I earnestly trust that we have n't. Don't think that we have raised objections just to be unpleasant. We have said what we did because we care so much for you and because we felt it our duty. You are our foster-daughter, and if you have definitely made up your mind to marry Dan, he will be our foster-son."

"I know," murmured Martha. "You are awfully good to me."

Mrs. Armstrong left her chair and put her arms around the girl's neck. "If you ever need us, Martha, we'll be waiting to help you. Now good

night, dear; I must go to bed." She leaned forward and kissed her cheek. Martha, showing one of her rare moments of affection, turned, caught Mrs. Armstrong's head with her hands, and kissed her tenderly.

"Good night," she said, her eyes shining with tears. "Good night, Mr. Armstrong." And, releasing Mrs. Armstrong, she rose quickly and went to her own room.

"It just breaks my heart, Jim," Mrs. Armstrong said as Martha's door closed; "it just breaks my heart. I'm afraid she's in love with him, and I know that he'll treat her like a squaw."

"He'll try to," he agreed, "but I don't think he will more than once. If I know Martha, he'd better not; that's all."

Mrs. Armstrong's nose once more dominated her gentle face as she answered pugnaciously: "I'll come up here and do something to him myself if he's mean to her. But even if he is kind, just think, Jim, how cruel the white people are bound to be. You know as well as I do that they'll cut her dead."

Mr. Armstrong rose wearily from his chair, leaned over the able, and turned down the wick of the lamp until all that was left was a feeble flame. His vague shadow wavered weirdly on the ceiling as he lifted his head and said with curious positiveness:

“Do you know, Jane, I have a feeling that Martha will take care of them.”

Then as his wife lighted a candle, he blew out the lamp.

CHAPTER IX

THE Armstrongs made no further protests, and Martha went happily ahead with the preparations for her wedding. Her trousseau consisted of the clothes she already possessed, her wedding-gown, and a new hat. Her foster-parents could not afford to give her more, but the gown was of real silk trimmed with lace five inches wide that Martha herself had crocheted. She made the dress with loving care, partly because it was for her wedding, but partly, too, because she knew that it would have to be her best for at least two years.

Finding a house proved rather easy. Dan said that he had heard that Aunt Ann had one to rent.

"Ann Mitchell, the negro lady?" Martha asked.

"Yeah—sure, Aunt Ann. Don't you know her?"

"Of course; everybody knows Aunt Ann. Do you want me to go look at the house?"

"Yeah. You and Mrs. Armstrong go look at it. And don't let the ol' nigger charge you too much, neither."

The next day the two women went to Covelo in the buggy, Mrs. Armstrong being far too weak to ride horseback. They found Aunt Ann in her kitchen ironing. In response to their knock, she

put the iron on the stove and came to the door, raising both hands with pleasure when she saw her visitors.

"Come in; come in," she cried, holding the screen-door open. "Lan' sakes, come in outta that sun. Mis' Armstrong, I 'm jes' that pleased to see you—an' you too, Marthy." She bustled about, dusting off chairs that were upholstered with crisscrossed strips of buckskin. "Set right down. Phew! ain't it hot? I'se mighty sorry you gotta set here in this 'ere hot kitchen, but I ain't got no parlor. Well, Marthy, I 've heard that you're goin' to get ma'ied. Is that right?"

"Yes, Aunt Ann. To Dan McLeod."

"So I heard. So I heard. Lawsy, how you children sho' do grow up. Lawd, Lawd!"

Aunt Ann had been brought to Covelo from Alabama by one of the earliest settlers, and she knew everything that had happened in the valley from the day the first man entered it to the hour before. No one ever discovered how she got her information, but she always had it, and, what's more, she usually had it before the event. More than once she had warned people that their cattle were going to be stolen; time and again she had prevented other crimes by interfering secretly. Yet she was always either in her kitchen washing or ironing or somewhere in the village nursing the sick. She was not only the town's only reliable newspaper; she was its

only nurse and midwife as well. Sometimes she got paid for her work, and sometimes she did n't, but pay or no pay, she always went when she was asked, even when the person needing her care was far up in the mountains.

She was very old; just how old neither she nor any one else knew. She had been a slave before the Civil War, and she always replied when asked her age that she reckoned that she was nigh on to a hundred—and she probably was. She was proudest of the fact that she had once met Abraham Lincoln, and she always told the story in the same words: "It was on a Mississippi river boat, honey, an' he asked me how the colo'ed folks was gettin' along. Lawsy, chile, he sho' was the ugliest man I ever laid these ol' eyes on." Aunt Ann's kinky black hair was usually divided into dozens of little braids, each one carefully pinned close to her head; she was thin, flatchested, and wrinkled; a homely old negress with a heart of pure gold, the one person in Round Valley without an enemy.

"Well, well, Mis' Armstrong, how you gettin' along?" she asked, seating herself in a rickety chair. "I suttinly am sorry that you been sick, and I sho' am sorry that you and Mr. Armstrong is leavin'. I'm a Baptis' myself, but seein' as how the Baptis' ain't got no church, I been goin' along with the Presbyterians, an' I sho' do like Mr. Armstrong's preachin' fine. Are you leavin' soon?"

"In two weeks," Mrs. Armstrong replied, wiping her forehead with her handkerchief. The kitchen was stifling.

"Lawsy, lawsy, that 's too bad! An' when you gettin' ma'ied, Marthy?"

"Next week, Aunt Ann. We've come to see about renting your other house. Dan said it was empty and that he had heard that you wanted to rent it."

"I suttinly do," Ann responded emphatically. "An' I suttinly would love to have you in that house. Do you all wanta see it?"

"Please."

Ann's two houses were separated only by an unpainted wooden fence; so the three of them went out the back door, through the vegetable garden, and into the back yard of the other house.

The house had never been painted, but it was not unattractive according to Covelo standards. It had three rooms, kitchen, parlor, and bedroom; and the parlor boasted a brick fireplace. It was shaded by cherry-trees in front and by enormous black walnut-trees in the rear.

Martha was enthusiastic. "It's just what we want," she exclaimed; and then added warily: "If we can afford it. How much is the rent?"

Ann looked at her and chuckled. "Well, honey, it depends on who the folks is. Some pays more 'n

others, but you're so pretty you pay the very leastes' I can get along with. The las' folks in heah paid me seven fifty, but you and your young man can have it for five dollars."

Five dollars! Martha considered deeply and thought of protesting the price. Five dollars a month was a lot to pay for rent; but, then, there was the fireplace. Where could they find another house with a fireplace? The well, too, was wonderful. Ann had given her a drink from it, and it had the coolest, freshest water she had ever tasted. But five dollars a month. . . She looked dubiously at Mrs. Armstrong.

That lady smiled and nodded. "I think that 's very reasonable, Martha. People are coming into the valley all the time, and rents are going up. I think you 'd better take it. Besides, I 'll feel lots safer about you if I know that you are right here with Aunt Ann." She turned to the old colored woman. "You 'll look after her for me, won't you?"

"'Deed I will, Mis' Armstrong. I 'll watch right over that chile. Don' you worry none."

So the house was rented, and Martha had to ask Dan for money for the first time.

"I've got to buy furnishings, Danny," she explained, "and I don't know how much they will cost. Not very much, I guess, because Mrs. Armstrong is going to give me some of their things. Just

think; she is going to give us the piano for a wedding-present. She says that she can't afford to have it taken over the mountains and shipped to San Francisco. Besides, it's so old that it won't stand the trip. We don't care about that, though; it'll do fine for us. And she's going to give me the furniture from my room, too. That will furnish the bedroom. We won't have to buy a stove. Aunt Ann's got one in the kitchen that she said we could use. But we'll have to have curtains and some matting and a table or two and some chairs."

Dan thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a long bag made of doeskin. "How much do you think you'll need?" he asked importantly. "Will a hundred dollars do?"

Martha gasped. A hundred dollars! Why, she could have a carpet in the parlor with all that money, not a rag-carpet but a real one. Her mind danced with plans. She'd buy lace curtains, the longest ones she could find, and she'd tie them up with blue ribbon. Just as soon as she had time she'd make a rag-carpet for the bedroom and a couple of small ones for the kitchen. Why, she could make that house a dream with a hundred dollars!

"Here!" Dan exclaimed when she did not answer but sat staring at him with round eyes of wonder. "What's the matter? Ain't a hundred enough?"

"Enough! Why, Danny, it's wonderful. We'll have the prettiest house in Covelo. I never hoped for so much."

Dan jingled his gold importantly and counted out the hundred dollars. Martha, he had decided, was bringing him luck; at least, he had n't been able to hold anything less than a straight the night before, and the chips and gold had piled before him into an imposing heap. He had left the game three hundred dollars ahead.

The two weeks of preparation more than sped by. Martha was busy from morning until late at night, sewing, shopping, and furnishing her house. At last, however, the house was in order, the wedding-dress was made and the new hat trimmed, and the last of the hundred dollars spent.

They were married the first Sunday in October in the Armstrongs' parlor. Martha played the organ for the Indian service in the morning and then hurried home to prepare dinner. When the meal was over and the dishes washed, she went to her own room to dress. Dan had been ordered to appear at the house promptly at 4:30 with his friend Billy Cutler, and she had only two hours in which to get ready. She declined Mrs. Armstrong's offer of assistance, feeling somehow that putting on her wedding-dress was a sacred rite that must be performed alone.

First she brought a wooden wash-tub into her

room, filled it with pails of hot water, and bathed. She was a little ashamed of herself for bathing on Sunday, but she could not put on her beautiful new clothes without being sure that she was immaculately clean. When she was half dressed she stood before the bureau and let down her hair. It fell in gleaming black masses to her knees. She shook it loosely over her shoulders and looked at herself in the wavy mirror. Even its imperfections could not completely distort her beauty. It twisted her nose into a crooked line and elongated her chin into a jagged edge, but her eyes shone back at her with their black brilliance undimmed; her lips remained delicately pink; and her hair was a shimmering, midnight wonder. She moved until she found a few square inches that were comparatively accurate.

"I'm beautiful," she whispered. "Beautiful, beautiful."

Then, reluctantly, she left her fascinating image and drew a stiffly starched underskirt over her head. She already had a soft short one on, quite plain and simple. The second underskirt had three large ruffles near the bottom, and the third one had five. The skirts reached to the floor and stood away from her as if they were wired. Combing her hair was usually a simple matter of coiling it into a large flat knot on the top of her head, but to-day she arranged it over and over again, brushing it until it

shone, and coiling and recoiling until not a hair was out of place.

Her wedding-gown was laid carefully on the bed, and she looked at it for a long time before she put it on. It was so lovely, so perfect! Finally she slipped on the waist, fastening all but four of the long row of small pearl buttons down the back. Those she would have to leave to Mrs. Armstrong. The net yoke around her neck fitted without a wrinkle, and it was met by a lace "bertha" five inches wide that was closely gathered all the way around and joined over the upper buttons in the center of her back. So wide was the lace that it lay on the bulging leg-of-mutton sleeves that suddenly dwindled down at her elbow until they clasped her forearms as tightly as silk gloves. The skirt was, of course, very tight at her waist and two yards and a half in circumference at the floor. It had three ruffles of lace that matched the bertha.

Just as she finished buttoning the skirt, Mrs. Armstrong knocked at the door.

"May I come in, Martha?" she called.

"Yes."

The door opened, and Mrs. Armstrong walked in with a lace veil draped over her right arm and with a wreath of artificial orange-blossoms in her left hand.

"This was my wedding-veil, dear, and my wed-

ding-wreath, and I want you to wear them. Will you?"

Tears sparkled in the girl's eyes as she clasped her hands and exclaimed rapturously: "Oh, Mrs. Armstrong! How beautiful they are!"

Mrs. Armstrong shook out the veil and held it up. "Yes, is n't it? But we have n't any time to waste, Martha. Dan and Billy Cutler are at the gate now, and it's half-past four. Let me tie your sash for you."

Martha handed her the long white satin ribbon. She slipped it around the girl's waist and tied it into a soft bow in the middle of her back. When she had buttoned the four remaining buttons, she asked Martha to sit down so that she could put on the veil and the wreath. First she pinned the soft veil around the shining coil of black hair; then she placed the wreath very carefully over the veil and pinned it firmly in place. She shook the folds of the veil over Martha's shoulders and stood back to observe the effect.

"Stand up, dear, so I can arrange the veil down to the floor." And as Martha obeyed, she exclaimed: "Oh, dear, it's so long that you'll have to hold it over your arm when you go into the parlor! You ought to have a page. I forgot how long it was. Never mind; it's a real wedding-veil. Turn around and let me look at you."

She gasped when Martha turned and waited

silently for the admiration that she knew would come. Excitement had brought a little color into her dark cheeks; her eyes were wide with virgin wonder; and her pink lips were slightly parted in a tremulous smile that revealed her even white teeth. The delicate veil chastened her vivid beauty, and she looked like a young nun about to be led to the altar of her Lord.

"Martha! Martha!" cried Mrs. Armstrong. "You lovely thing! Oh, how I'm going to miss you!" And she put her arms around her and held her close. A second later she lifted her head and mopped her eyes. "I'll spot your beautiful dress if I don't watch out. I'm such a ninny!" The pug nose was once more in the ascendant.

"Now listen," she continued. "When you hear me play the first chords of the wedding-march, you come into the parlor. Jim and Dan will be waiting for you. Are you ready?"

Martha clasped her hands nervously; then her head went up. "Yes," she said quietly; "I'm ready."

Mrs. Armstrong left the room, and a minute later Martha heard the thin notes of the piano. She clenched her hands and stood rigidly still as if rooted to the floor. She was afraid, hideously afraid. The music went on; it was a peremptory command. She lifted her eyes heavenward. "Please, God," she murmured.

Then she walked into the parlor. Dan, with Billy Cutler beside him, was standing before Mr. Armstrong in the center of the room. Martha moved slowly to him, her eyes modestly downcast. He gazed at her in awe, and a gasp of admiration broke from Cutler.

Mrs. Armstrong played a concluding chord, and her husband immediately began the ceremony as she turned on the stool and stood up. Dan's "I do" was a mutter, Martha's a shy whisper, and his embrace was almost pathetically clumsy when Mr. Armstrong pronounced them man and wife.

The whole affair had been agony for Dan. He had got drunk the night before, not because he was particularly thirsty for liquor but because his confidence was wilting and his pride was in arrogant revolt. Sunday morning brought no comforting assurance, and the plans for the day filled him with terror, no less. He and Billy were to stay at the Armstrongs for a light supper, then go with them and Martha to church for the evening service, and after that was over he was to be permitted to take his wife to their new home. The thought of the supper was bad enough, but the thought of appearing in church with Martha beside him was almost too much. He knew the whispering that would go on; he knew to a word what would be said: "Dan McLeod has married that breed girl, Martha Baker."

More than once he thought of running away, but his desire for the girl was greater than his fear or his pride; so, bolstered up by the jovial Billy, he finally made his way to the house and lived through the ceremony. He had a new black suit that fitted him nowhere and pointed tan shoes that pinched everywhere. His white collar was so high that it cut his neck; and his tie, sewed by experts in a perfect knot, slipped constantly askew. He looked ridiculous and knew it.

Things went better, though, than he had expected. Cutler was awed neither by the Armstrongs nor by the solemnity of the occasion; he was n't the sort of person to be awed by anything, a slight, boyish fellow with merry blue eyes, wiry brown hair, red cheeks, and a vulgar mouth. He kissed the bride so explosively that everybody, Dan included, began to laugh. Mrs. Armstrong tactfully started the conversation about Dan's liberality in furnishing the house, and she expressed her admiration so enthusiastically about its beauty and comfort that Dan swelled with pride and almost forgot his collar and shoes. She explained that the piano would be taken into Covelo the next day.

"I know it's a shame not to have it there for you when you move in," she said apologetically, "but I just could n't have Martha married without music. A wedding is no more a wedding without a wedding-march than it is without a cake, and I want to tell

you that we 've got such a cake as you 've never seen before." She smiled roguishly. "Mrs. McLeod baked it herself."

"Har, har, har," roared Cutler. "Mrs. McLeod! What do yuh know about that? Har, har, har! Say, Mrs. McLeod, how do yuh like bein' called that?"

Martha blushed, but she responded with spirit.

"Fine! It 's the best name there is, and, with Dan added to it, it 's perfect. I think Martha McLeod sounds pretty well, too."

"It certainly does," agreed Mr. Armstrong. "It 's much better than Martha Baker."

The supper was not the ordeal that Dan had expected. Cutler's table manners were so bad that he felt sure that no one was noticing his own, and Cutler's conversation was so continuous that it was hardly necessary for him to say anything. Nor was church such an humiliating experience. Martha wore her wedding-dress, all her other clothes having been taken to her new home the day before, and she was so beautiful that his prejudice was completely lost in his pride. "Let 'em talk," he told himself. "She 's got 'em all skinned." People did look, of course, but nothing particularly embarrassing happened, and the service was over before he realized it.

Martha said a brief good night to her foster-parents in the vestry, promising to see them the

next day; then she and Dan walked the short distance to their cottage. Hardly had they entered the house and lighted the parlor lamp when there was a wild clangor of cow-bells in the front yard, a banging of tin utensils, and a roar of shouts.

Martha paused in the process of taking off her hat and turned to Dan with fear in her eyes.

"What is it?" she gasped.

Dan grinned. "Oh, it's just some of the boys come to chivaree us. I knew they was goin' to do it; so I bought a lot of liquor to-day and put it in the kitchen. They won't go 'way till they get a few drinks. I'll go out and ask 'em in."

When he appeared on the porch, the noise was doubled. He waited until there was a moderate silence and then he called to the mob, "Come in and have a drink."

The men swirled up the porch and into the parlor, a shouting, yelling gang. They glanced admiringly at Martha standing shyly in a corner and called boisterously: "Good evenin', Mrs. McLeod"; "Good luck"; "Hope you can stand Dan"; and other well-meant but not always tactful greetings.

They roared with delight when Dan appeared with the liquor. They drank joyously and long; they whispered sly things in Dan's ear, sometimes so loudly that Martha heard them; they slapped him on the back and told him that he was damned lucky; and eventually they got splendidly drunk.

When the last of the liquor was gone, they permitted Dan to shoo them out of the house, but their farewell remarks made Martha's cheeks burn.

Finally the house was free of the last intruder. Dan locked the door and turned to Martha. The fingers of her right hand trembled against her throat. That look in his eyes . . .

CHAPTER X

DAN killed Martha's love that night, killed it once and for all. She had never dreamed that any man could be so brutal, so inconceivably beastly. He had drunk liberally with his visitors, and his chivalric instincts, faint at best, had been drowned in liquor. He turned Martha into a terrified, shamed creature who wondered how she could bear the life before her.

She gave no hint to any one, however, of her bitter realization of her mistake. She had breakfast waiting for Dan every morning at half-past five; she performed her household duties scrupulously; and she did all of Mrs. Armstrong's packing for her in the two weeks that followed her marriage. When the day finally came for her foster-parents to leave the valley, she felt so utterly alone, so completely friendless, that her spirit quailed. Why, why, had n't she listened to their pleadings? Why had n't she gone away with them?

She said good-by to the Armstrongs the night before they left, and for the first time they saw her really overcome by emotion. She clung to Mrs. Armstrong and wept.

"How can I get along without you?" she whispered between sobs. "What am I going to do?"

Her real meaning escaped Mrs. Armstrong; she thought that the girl was naturally terrified at the prospect of losing her lifelong protectors. The good woman sobbed with Martha and embraced her tenderly.

"There, there, dear," she said at last, gaining control of herself. "We must n't cry like this. You've got Dan, and before long you are coming to Alameda to visit Jim and me. You will come, won't you?"

Martha used her handkerchief vigorously on her nose and eyes and tried to emulate Mrs. Armstrong's control.

"Of course, I'm coming," she replied, sniffing weakly, "but I'm going to miss you so." She held the little, worn-out woman close to her and said tremblingly: "You've been so good to me, you and Mr. Armstrong. I owe you everything."

"Martha," Mr. Armstrong admonished sternly to hide his own emotion, "if you begin talking like that we'll put you out of the house. You've been a great happiness to Jane and me, and we won't stand for any thanks. Now, dry your eyes like a good girl. I hear Dan coming for you in a buggy, and he must n't find you weeping and wailing. He'll think that you don't love him."

Martha made use of the handkerchief again. The

mention of Dan had made her stiffen in every muscle; in an instant she was nervously on the defensive.

"I'll be watching for the stage in the morning," she said with surprising restraint, "and don't forget to wave." She heard Dan mounting the steps. She kissed Mrs. Armstrong warmly, and then, to Mr. Armstrong's astonishment, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him, too.

She was waiting at the corner of her fence the next morning at a little after five. It was still dark when the big stage rattled up, the driver cracking his whip and the four horses snorting impatiently in the cool morning. She called and waved a large towel.

"Good-by, Martha; good-by." She could hear the two voices and could just make out the splatter of white that she knew was Mrs. Armstrong's handkerchief.

"Good-by—good-by. . . ." and the stage disappeared in the darkness.

When she went back to the house, she found that Dan had already departed, and she was glad. She wept as she washed the dishes and went about her housework, but he found her quite calm when he came home for his noonday dinner.

For the first few weeks of her marriage, Martha had been so busy getting her house in order, helping the Armstrongs and thinking of Dan's uncontrol-

lable lust that she had little time to give any thought to her neighbors; but suddenly she found that her house was entirely in order, that the Armstrongs were gone, and that Dan was something to be endured as a necessary evil. When she finally became calm and was able to think coherently, she remembered that Dan had never been anything but a means to an end, anyway. He was crude always, loathsome often, and he had done terrible things to her pride, but he was a white man and her husband; she was Mrs. Daniel McLeod, and as such a social entity in Covelo. Dan might be a beast; he might gamble often and drink regularly; he might refuse to ask a blessing at the table, laugh her out of saying her prayers at night, and swear his contempt when she asked him to go to church with her; he might be niggardly with money when luck was against him at cards, but he *was* white and her husband. She settled down and waited for callers.

Only one came. She saw Aunt Ann daily, but Aunt Ann was black and therefore socially of no importance. When Martha went to church, the women bowed and said, "Good evening, Martha"; but when they had done that much, they obviously felt that they had done their Christian duty. They suffered her presence in the house of the Lord, but they certainly showed no intention of suffering it in their own houses. Furthermore, their nods and

their formal greetings were entirely nullified by the "Martha" that they invariably used when addressing her. It never seemed to occur to them that she ought to be called Mrs. McLeod, and Martha knew exactly why it did not occur to them: every one called squaws by their first names.

She did finally have a caller, however. A week after the departure of the Armstrongs, she was busily sewing when she heard a knock at the parlor door. Upon opening it, she was astounded to see Mrs. Lester Nichols, the wife of one of the richest farmers in the valley. Nichols had met her in San Francisco, and he had conquered her so completely that she had followed him without complaint over the mountains to Covelo and endured its discomforts with grim humor. She was considered extremely snobbish in the village—"stuck up" was the word used; she read books, visited San Francisco occasionally, and kept a hired girl. Her appearance at the door dazzled Martha into a momentary silence. She had not aimed so high.

"You're Martha McLeod, are n't you?" asked Mrs. Nichols brightly. "Well, I'm Nancy Nichols, and I've come to get acquainted."

"Oh, do come in!" Martha exclaimed, regaining her poise. "I'm awfully glad to see you."

Mrs. Nichols frankly looked the parlor over before she sat down. "How pretty your parlor is!

Those pink roses in the rug are lovely, and the fireplace makes the room look so comfortable. You've got a piano, too. How wonderful!"

"Mrs. Armstrong gave it to me," Martha explained. "It was hers."

"I'm so sorry that I never really got acquainted with Jane Armstrong," said Mrs. Nichols ruefully as she drew off her gloves. "She was one of the few women in this valley worth knowing; but, you see, I've been here only a little over a year, and I've been down below the last two months. I've been busy, and Mrs. Armstrong's been sick; so there you are. If it had n't been for that, I'd have known you sooner." Her bright brown eyes smiled pleasantly at Martha, and her determined little mouth followed suit. She was a small woman, decisive and outspoken, not pretty; but Covelo, in spite of its disapproval of her manner, admitted that she was "awful stylish."

Martha hardly knew what to say. She was rather afraid of Mrs. Nichols and her vast experience in the world, and she could not understand the reason for her call. She ventured on the subject of clothes, and her first shy remark led to consequences that made her an independent woman.

"What a pretty dress you have on!" she said softly; "it's so stylish. Did it come from San Francisco?"

Mrs. Nichols ran a caressing hand over the gray

silk. "Of course, it did," she replied with a touch of acid in her voice. "Do you suppose I could get anything decent made in this place? I had this dress made in the city, and I paid a pretty price for it, too. I'm not sorry, though. Don't you think the sleeves are sweet? And I adore the buttons."

The sleeves were bulging leg-of-mutton affairs, and the buttons, rows and rows of them, were gray mother-of-pearl embossed with imitation silver.

"It's the most beautiful dress I've ever seen," Martha exclaimed, ingenuously enthusiastic.

"Well, I'll have to admit that I've seen some that I thought were more beautiful, but this one is quite good enough for Covelo. But your own dress is pretty, too."

"Why, it's just gingham!"

"I know; but it's got style, and that's something mighty rare around here. Who made it, anyway? I've been looking for some one to do some sewing for me, but every woman in this town turns a dress into a Mother-Hubbard, no matter what the material is. Who does your sewing for you? I'll look her up this very afternoon."

Martha smiled modestly and admitted that she had made the dress herself. "I make all my own clothes," she added.

"You do! What a wonder you are! I can't sew a dish-cloth straight, and it would make you sick to see the darns I put in Lester's socks. They make

him lame sometimes, I do believe." Suddenly her brown eyes began to snap eagerly. "Won't you do some sewing for me?" she asked with real pleading in her voice. "I'll be grateful forever and ever."

"Why, why—" Martha hesitated. "Why, I don't know." She felt slightly chilled. The wonderful call was turning into a mere request that she become a seamstress, and she wondered if Mrs. Nichols had called on her merely to make that request. She did her an injustice. Nancy Nichols never disguised her intentions, and she had come to see Martha out of the kindness of her heart and for no other reason.

"Now, listen here, child," she said decisively; "don't be foolish. I'm thirty years old—yes, I was an old maid all right—and that's a whole lot older than you are; so I'm going to talk to you like a grandmother. You've got a pretty little house here and all that sort of thing, but Lester tells me that your husband is working on the Updegraff place; so you can't be exactly rolling in wealth. And you can't be very busy with just this little place to take care of. There is n't any reason in the world, not one, why you should n't make a little money, and I won't be the only woman in the valley who will bless you if you will do her sewing. Why, I was calling on Mrs. Tucker yesterday, and she was all but chewing the table-cloth. She said that she had hunted the valley over and that she could n't find any one that could make a decent dress, and she's got some

blue taffeta that is just crying to be made into something absolutely scrumptious. And I know that Mrs. Perry and Mrs. Doyle are looking for somebody, too. You can be a good Samaritan and make a lot of money in the bargain. Don't let any silly false pride stop you from helping us and yourself at the same time."

The money was far more important to Martha than Mrs. Nichols realized. When Dan was lucky at cards, he was generous, but when he was n't lucky, it was difficult to get money out of him even for food. It humiliated her to ask him for money, and so this opportunity to earn some for herself would have been more than welcome if she had only been sure that working would not reduce her social status. She remembered, however, as she thought rapidly, that Mrs. Cornwall "went out sewing" and that she was invited everywhere. Mrs. Cornwall decided her.

"Well, I might do a little," she admitted slowly. "I don't think Dan will object. He's talking of driving some cattle to the coast for George White, and if he does that he'll be gone for a couple of weeks and I won't have a thing to do. I might just as well be sewing."

"Oh, that's fine! Now, I have a little dimity—" And from then on the conversation was restricted to clothes, of new dresses to be made and of old dresses to be remade.

Just before she took her leave, Mrs. Nichols offered some free advice. "You 're young, my dear," she said bluntly, "and you 're very beautiful. If you follow the example of the average woman of Covelo, you 'll look like the wrath of Satan within a year, and your husband will wonder what has become of the little beauty he married. Now, listen to me: no matter how you feel, never, never leave off your corsets—not for a minute—and avoid a wrapper or a Mother-Hubbard as you would the smallpox. There is n't a man on God's green earth that does n't hate to see a woman slopping around in one of those messy things, and the day you take off your corsets—well, that 's the day you 've started downhill. An uncorseted woman in a Mother-Hubbard does n't look moral; and according to my way of thinking, she is n't."

Martha was embarrassed by her frankness, but she thanked her heartily and promised to make her new dress for her.

That night when Dan came home, she asked him for a horse.

"A horse?" he repeated, surprised by the magnitude of her request. "What do you need a horse for?"

"I 'm going to do some sewing for Mrs. Nichols, and I can't walk 'way out there; it must be all of four miles. Mrs. Nichols said, too, that she knew that Mrs. Perry and Mrs. Doyle were looking for

some one to sew for them, and I can't go on foot all over the valley. I ought to make enough to buy all my own clothes and maybe some things for the house, too." She did not know whether Dan would like her plan of "working out" or not. She hoped that he would object, but she was afraid that he would approve.

He did, heartily. "Say, that's a good idea," he exclaimed. "You ought to be able to make damn good money. Sure, I'll get you a hoss. I know where I can get one cheap, a pretty good plug, too. Gotta have it right away?"

"Yes; I promised Mrs. Nichols that I would come Monday."

"All right. I'll get it tomorrer. Say, I'm leavin' Monday for the Coast. I'm goin' to help Pete Miner drive a herd of cattle over to Fort Bragg. I'll be gone 'bout two weeks, I guess."

"Then you are n't going to work on the Updegraff place any more?"

"Naw. I don't like it there, milkin' cows and feedin' hogs. Besides, it don't pay good enough. I like to be on a hoss."

Martha made no comment, but inwardly she rejoiced. A vaquero's work would not permit him to be home very often, and Dan's absence was a consummation devoutly to be wished. He would be away, she knew, weeks at a time; the oftener and the longer, the better.

True to his promise, he bought the horse the next day, a little bay nag that was n't particularly handsome nor very young but entirely adequate for Martha's needs. He left early Monday morning for Fort Bragg, and she bade him good-by with no outward show of her inner delight. She sang while she did the housework. When that was done, she ate her lunch and departed happily on the bay horse for Mrs. Nichols and independence.

From then on, life for Martha settled into a routine. As Mrs. Nichols had prophesied, there was work for her in abundance; so there was hardly an afternoon that she was not at some house in the valley busily sewing. Dan's brief visits home were the only thing that marred her placid days, and she endured them as best she could, but each visit seemed worse than the one preceding, his crudeness more marked, his passion more terrible and brutal, his lascivious touch more hideously offensive. Some day, she thought, she would kill him.

A year went rapidly by. She supported herself, Dan rarely giving her any money, but she did not care. She knew before she had been married a week that Dan did not consider her his wife but his woman; and, she told herself proudly, she would be no man's woman. She wanted none of his money: she could buy her own clothes and food; she could buy her own wood; she could pay her own rent. But when he asked to borrow money from her, she

declined his request so sharply that he was non-plussed.

"I'll pay you for the horse," she said coldly, "but I won't loan you a cent."

Dan, home on one of his rare visits, looked at her in surprise. He had never heard her use that tone before, and he had taken it for granted that she would give him the money without any unpleasant remarks.

"What in hell is gettin' into yuh?" he demanded sulkily. "I ain't askin' for your life, am I? I'm busted, though. The boys cleaned me at seven-up. Well, buy the plug if you want to."

She bought the horse and was glad of the opportunity, feeling at last that she owed Dan little. Two months later she was able to say that she owed him nothing, but in making the payment she turned her life upside down.

CHAPTER XI

MARTHA had feared when she began to work as a seamstress that she would sacrifice her social standing, but so acute was her need for independence that she had put her social aspirations in abeyance, trusting that later she would have time to call and be called upon. She found, however, that her professional association with the white women of the valley was helping rather than hindering her chances of success. Practically every woman she sewed for worked from five in the morning until eight at night, and a worker naturally sympathizes with and respects another worker, no matter how much he may envy the aristocratic idler. Women who daily criticized Mrs. Nichols for hiring a squaw to do her washing and ironing found virtue in Martha's industry.

Most of her employers frankly liked her; they were delighted with her sewing and said so; and they usually stole a few minutes to visit with her while she made their dresses. The friendliness in their homes extended to the church, and their Sabbath greetings were no longer merely cold acknowledgments of her existence. She was often asked to

sing a solo, and her presence in church eventually was accepted as something right and proper. Even Mrs. Kerwin, who had objected so vigorously to Martha's playing the organ, once asked her to sing; and she made no comments when Martha took the new minister's wife's place as organist on a few Sundays.

The girl felt that she was making progress. She knew that she was n't completely accepted; but there was n't another half-breed in the valley, man or woman, who ever entered the white people's church, and not one of them ever got into a white man's house except as a menial. She realized well enough that her own entrée was acquired in much that fashion, but a seamstress was far superior to a servant-girl, and there was no doubt that she was regarded as superior. No, she was n't completely accepted, but she felt that she had reason to believe that she would be if things just went on for another year or two as they had been going.

But they did n't go on that way. She had been married a little over a year when she received a letter from Mr. Armstrong saying that his wife had died. "Consumption was the trouble with her all along," he wrote, "and the cold, foggy climate down here was very bad for her." The death of her foster-mother deprived Martha of her last support. She was alone. Mr. Armstrong was a good man and she loved him, but he had never won the place

in her heart that his wife had, and she knew that she would never turn to him in time of trouble. Furthermore, he wrote that he thought he would go east to his family if he could manage it, and a month later he wrote that he was going. She was so alone then, so utterly alone.

A week after the arrival of Mr. Armstrong's second letter, Dan came home one night in a rather ugly mood.

"I 've gotta have some money, Martha," he said sullenly as he slumped into a chair, threw his big hat on the table, and placed his revolver beside it.

She let her sewing fall into her lap and looked him over. His eyes were slightly bleared, and she knew that he had been drinking; his hair was a blond, unkempt mass; his cheeks and chin were rough with three days' growth of beard. His hands were dirty, his nails broken and black. Martha knew that his shirt and underclothes were clean because she had washed them, but she knew, too, that he had n't had a bath for weeks and that he probably would n't take one for weeks to come. "Filthy, drunken brute," she thought, feeling almost nauseated with disgust.

"What do you want money for?"

He ignored the chill in her voice and plucked vaguely at the wool in his chaps.

"I 'm cleaned out," he muttered, "plumb clean. Damn it, I could n't hold even a pair of deuces.

I've gotta have some coin; that's all. Loan me twenty-five."

"I won't loan you two bits; no, not a nickel."

"The hell you say!" He looked at her, his eyes blazing furiously. "You—you—"

"Wait a minute." Her words were like cold steel, and he paused in his denunciation.

"Well, I'm waitin'," he grumbled sulkily. "What's eatin' yuh?"

Martha carefully placed her sewing on the table and put her thimble in its little red case before she spoke; but there was something in her manner that warned Dan, slightly drunk though he was, that he had better be careful.

"I've told you before," she said with quiet definiteness, "that I would n't loan you money. I make my money by hard work; and if I did n't make it, I would n't have a thing to eat or wear. I work every day except Sunday from five in the morning till eight or nine at night, sometimes later; and if you think I'm slaving that way to supply you with poker-money, you're very much mistaken. You have n't given me a cent for the last six months. I buy all the wood for this house, all the food; I pay the rent; I raise the chickens and the vegetables; I do the washing and ironing; I do everything. When you're in town, I support you. All right; I'm not saying any more about that, but I won't give you money to gamble with."

Dan started from his chair and shouted fiercely, "The hell you won't!"

"Sit down!" And to his own surprise, Dan sat down.

"I'll give you some money," she went on evenly, "but I won't loan you any, and this will be the last money that I'll give you, too. You gave me a hundred dollars to use for furnishing the house. I'll pay you that hundred."

"Wha-what?" stuttered Dan. "Say, what's gettin' into yuh, anyhow? What yuh wanta buy the furniture for? Huh?"

"Never mind. I'll give you a hundred dollars for the furniture. Don't you want it?"

"Sure I want it. Fork it over."

Martha was sitting at the table. She shoved Dan's hat and revolver out of the way, opened the drawer, and took out of it pen, paper, and ink. She wrote rapidly and then handed the sheet of paper to Dan.

"There," she said; "give that to Mr. Kerr and he will give you a hundred dollars."

"Kerr?" Dan asked, blinking stupidly. "What's Kerr got to do with it?"

"You don't suppose that I keep my money here in the house with you around, do you? Mr. Kerr's got it in his safe in the store, and I made him promise not to give you a cent unless you brought a

note from me. There 's the note. You give it to him and he 'll give you the money."

Dan pocketed the note. "All right," he said, yawning heavily. "Have it your way. I 'm goin' to bed."

"Wait a minute. I 've got something more to say." Martha turned in her chair and faced him squarely.

"Well, for God's sake, say it fast. I 'm sleepy."

"It won't take me long. I only hope you are n't too drunk to understand me. Now, listen. I 've paid you for the horse, and I 've paid you for the furniture, and I 've more than paid you for the little food you bought when we were first married." She paused, and her eyes glittered bitterly. "I 've paid you for everything, and I 've almost paid you with my soul."

"Say, what in hell are you talkin' about?" Dan demanded angrily. "What's all this gabbin' about your soul?"

"I 'm talking about you—you drunken, dirty beast. I 'm telling you that I won't have any more of you." Her voice rose, and her face paled into an ashy gray. "You can stay in this house if you want to, and I 'll feed you, and I 'll wash your filthy clothes, and I 'll pay your rent; but I won't sleep with you any more. You can have the bedroom or the sofa in here, but I 'm going to sleep alone."

"What?" he roared. "What?"

"I'm going to sleep alone," she repeated, her voice trembling with fierce determination.

"You 're goin' to sleep alone! Haw, haw, haw!" His laugh was a raucous insult, with the sting placed in its incredulousness. "Sleep alone! Like hell you are!" He leaned forward and glared at her contemptuously. "Say, you poor squaw, what in God's name do you think I married you for?"

Martha could have endured the question, but the word "squaw" turned her into a mad woman. She sprang to her feet, at the same time snatching his revolver from the table. The last trace of color rushed from her face and left it chalky—even her lips were gray—and her eyes burned like black fire.

"Get out of here, you skunk," she whispered, her voice sibilant as a lash. "Get out of here—quick."

Dan quailed before her, more afraid of her eyes than of the gun. He had faced guns before, but he had never faced a woman like this.

"Aw, Martha, cut it out," he pleaded contritely; "forget it."

She stared at him contemptuously for a full minute while he squirmed in his chair. "Wait here," she said, coldly imperative, and went into the bedroom. A few minutes later she returned dragging a large bundle on the floor.

"There are your things. Take them and get

out!" The revolver gleamed in her hand, and her words snapped.

"Aw, Martha," Dan began remonstrating.

"*Get out!*" She lifted the revolver with a trembling hand, and her voice rose into an hysterical shriek. He looked at her; then, grinning in sheepish defeat, he put on his hat, picked up the bundle, and went out of the door.

When the weight on the gate banged it closed, Martha slumped to the floor in a sobbing heap.

CHAPTER XII

MARTHA had unintentionally chosen her night well for the break. Dan left the following morning with a drove of cattle for Ukiah, and she did not expect him to return for at least a week. There would be trouble, she supposed, when he got back, but she felt capable of repelling him. The trouble, however, did not come, for Dan never returned to Round Valley, preferring to hunt in new pastures rather than fight for the possession of an old one. He drifted north, working when he had to, gambling when he had the money, and finally settling in Montana, having found there a country suited to his tastes. Martha never saw him again.

For a few weeks after his departure, she looked for him daily, but when a month passed and she heard nothing of him, she knew that he had taken her at her word, and she relaxed into proud independence. She was satisfied; she had his name, she was known in the valley as the wife of a white man, and she had no child. She had prayed that there would be none, and God, she felt, had been good and granted her prayer. A child would have been a

daily reminder of Dan's caresses, and she wanted to forget them as soon as she could.

Outwardly her life seemed much the same, but actually it was seriously changed. No one noticed Dan's absence for a month, but finally Mrs. Kerwin asked Martha after church when her husband was coming back.

"He is n't coming back," Martha replied shortly.

Mrs. Kerwin, astonished and excited, clasped her hands over her stomach. "Not coming back?" she cried. "Why, what's the matter?"

Martha looked contemptuously at the smug, plump woman before her. "I told him not to," she replied, then turned and left the church.

Mrs. Kerwin bustled here and there, whispering, "Martha McLeod's husband's left her. She told me so herself." The congregation fluttered happily, and on every side little jubilant choruses matched each other, a gleeful antistrophe for every spiteful strophe: "I always said it would happen"; "It serves him right for marrying a half-breed"; "I did n't think it would last so long"; "Say what you will, a squaw's a squaw every time"; "Blood will tell"; and so on until the church slowly emptied of its worshippers. The good women, after the manner of good women, damned Martha without trial and without mercy.

She had only two defenders, Aunt Ann and Mrs. Nichols. Omniscient as always, Aunt Ann knew the

whole story, and out of the bigness of her heart she spread it right and left. "That Dan McLeod boy, warn't no good," she would say. "He was a bad, drinkin' bum; tha's what he was. Don' you tell me. Nobody can tell Aunt Ann. She knows. That Marthy chile is jes' as sweet an' good as ever she can be, and she jes' stood that lazy good-for-nothin' till she could n't stan' him no more; tha's all. Folks outta shet their dirty moufs; tha's what they outta do. They don' know what they 're talkin' 'bout. No, suh; they ain't got no right to talk about that honey lamb thataway."

Aunt Ann's information was usually respected for its accuracy, but when it interfered with the pleasure of gossip, it was calmly ignored; and her version of the separation took all the salt out of the scandal. Mrs. Nichol's defense did Martha more harm than good. One good woman expressed the opinion of all of them at a meeting of the Dorcas Aid Society. "That Nancy Nichols is always trying to be different than everybody else," she said sharply. "She took up with this Martha McLeod the minute she was married, and now she 's goin' round stickin' up for her, saying that McLeod was n't any good. Huh, I guess he would n't 'a' left her if he did n't have some reason to. I never saw a half-breed yet that was any better than she had to be, and nothin' Nancy Nichols can say will make me think any different. When she 's lived up here as long as I

have, she 'll know somethin' about squaws, and maybe she 'll get over some of her high-falutin' notions she got down below."

The women continued to employ Martha because she was far and away the best seamstress in the valley, and they were n't quite ready yet to sacrifice their appearance for the sake of public morality; but they no longer visited with her while she worked, and their greetings in church froze back into their first formality. Martha noticed the change at once, but she gave no sign. Some day, she thought, they would find out that she had n't been to blame, and then they would be sorry they had been so cold to her. She was hurt and angry but not discouraged; she could stand a good deal to be rid of Dan, and the time would come when justification would be hers; of that she was positive.

Waiting was not easy, however, and it was lonely. For a year after Dan's departure she endured a dull life, working hard, outwardly calm and apparently indifferent to the continued coldness of the villagers but inwardly unhappy and rebellious. She continued to live in Aunt Ann's little house, and she had no idea of how severely she was criticized for doing it. Respectable women, Covelo whispered, did not live alone; no, indeed, and when a woman, a half-breed especially, did live alone—well, it was n't for any good purpose. The women admitted to each other that nothing derogatory was actually *known* about

Martha's conduct, but they invariably added that they could guess what was happening. The cool acknowledgments of her presence in church became chillingly frigid, and after a time she was no longer asked to sing. Martha knew that something was wrong, but she could not imagine what it was.

She was too proud to ask Aunt Ann, and Ann was too kind-hearted to tell her without being asked. Eventually, however, she was told by Mrs. Nichols, whose indignation usually unleashed her tongue.

Martha was trying a dress on her, and as she turned this way and that at Martha's requests, she noticed that the girl looked tired and depressed.

"What 's the matter, Martha?" she asked, slipping her arm through a basted sleeve. "You 're getting thin. Have you been sick?"

Martha's no mumbled its way out among the pins in her mouth.

"Well, something 's the matter, and I think I know what it is. You 're letting the nasty-minded old hens in this town worry you." She held out her arm and observed it critically. "Don't you think this sleeve is a little tight at the elbow?"

"Un huh"; and Martha snapped the basting-thread.

"It feels a little tight. That 's better. Now, listen here to me. If you let their talk worry you, you 're a little ninny; that 's all. Half of them can't trust their husbands an inch, and nine tenths of

them are such sights that you can't blame the men."

Martha's mouth was so full of pins that any comment from her was impossible. She was on her knees pinning up the hem of the dress, and Mrs. Nichols could not see her face pale as she listened.

"There're jealous of your beauty for one thing," she continued tartly; "and they're every last one of 'em cats. They know you could take their stupid husbands away from them with a blink of your eyes, and they're so scared that you're going to that they've got all their claws out ready to scratch. Besides, all of them are so darned piously good that they've got filthy minds. Let me tell you something, Martha: if you want to meet up with a really dirty-minded woman, just hunt up one that is so self-righteously good that she has to tell you about it. She knows something nasty about every other woman in town, and she's never happy until she's told you what she knows. Most of the women in this little hick village are so self-righteous that they plain stink."

Martha rose slowly to her feet and took the few remaining pins out of her mouth. "I'll need some more lawn for the flounces," she said wearily. "About four or five yards, I guess." She moved in back of Mrs. Nichols and began to unpin the waist. "Do you mean that the women are talking about me? I have n't done anything wrong."

"Of course you have n't, child! Who said you had? But I've heard them talk. Oh, have n't I? Not one of them knows one definite thing against you; not one; but they gabble just the same. And do you want to know why? Because you live alone; that's why."

Martha stepped in front of her and took the waist off carefully; then, removing a few more pins, she drew the skirt down over Mrs. Nichols's hips so that she could step out of it.

"But I've got to live alone, Mrs. Nichols. I have n't anybody to live with."

"Naturally. But what difference does that make to women like Mrs. Kerwin?"

"The Lord knows that I don't want Mr. Kerwin, the nasty, scraggly old thing," Martha replied with spirit, her black eyes beginning to flash. "And if you want to know, it was only last Thursday that I sent him packing. I'd been down to Kerr's store to get a bag of salt when I met him by the flour-mill. He surprised me by being awfully friendly, 'cause he hardly speaks to me in church; and before I knew what was happening, he was squeezing my arm until it hurt. I slapped his ugly old face for him good and plenty, and he let go in a hurry."

Mrs. Nichols squealed with delight. "Oh, would n't I like to tell Bessie Kerwin that!" she exclaimed. "If she keeps on talking, maybe I will, too; and I'll be careful to see that plenty of people

can hear. I suppose he is n't the only pillar of the church that has sagged in your direction?"

Martha sat down, threaded her needle, and began to baste the pinned hem while Mrs. Nichols put on her house-dress. "I should say not! Did you notice that burn on Harry Kelsey's hand?"

"Yes. I asked him about it, and he said that he got it branding cattle."

"Well, he did n't. I was ironing last Tuesday night when he suddenly walked into the kitchen. I told him to go away, but he would n't. Pretty soon he tried to put his arm around me; so I just slapped the back of his hand with the hot iron. How he did cuss! But he got out; I'll tell you that. I suppose Mrs. Kelsey's talking about me, too?"

"Of course! A woman as skinny as Mabel Kelsey would be bound to talk. How she got Harry in the first place is a mystery to me, but I've heard that her father left her two hundred head of cattle and five hundred acres of good farming-land." She pulled her dress into place and then turned and asked Martha to button the waist. When she continued speaking, it was more gently, with the venom gone from her voice.

"Really, though, Martha, you can hardly go on living alone. The women are gabbing and gabbing, and the first thing you know they won't give you their sewing. What will you do then?"

Martha finished the buttoning and returned to

basting the hem. "I don't know," she murmured. "I have n't done a thing wrong, and it seems to me sometimes that I've had to slap about half the men in this town. There's nobody I can get to live with me. I've got to live alone; that's all."

The prospect was dreary and discouraging, but she never quite lost heart, encouraged partly by her own feeling of innocence and partly by the knowledge that both Aunt Ann and Mrs. Nichols believed in her. She knew, furthermore, that there was n't a man in the valley who did not know that she could not be approached; and, as time went on, she sensed a different attitude in the men toward her as she went about the village. When she was first left alone, they had obviously considered her fair game, and a great many of them had made attempts to bring down the beautiful bird; but after a number of them had been sharply repelled, the word got around the saloons that that Martha McLeod was n't letting anybody put a hand on her. Man-like, they respected her decency and pride even while they were eager to destroy both, and in little ways they showed their respect. They began to touch the brim of their hats as she passed; they mumbled courteous greetings; and a few of them even called her Mrs. McLeod. As fast as she lost ground with the women, just so fast did she gain it with the men, but there was small comfort in her semi-victory. It was the women who held the

cards she wanted. The men might bow to her respectfully in the street, but there was n't one of them who would dare to call on her in open day, not one who would think of escorting her to church or to a dance.

The knights and kings on a chess-board are at the mercy of the queens—and Martha was only a pawn.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Dan had been gone a year and a half and Martha had passed her twenty-first birthday, she began to think of getting a divorce. She spoke to Mrs. Nichols about it, and she in turn consulted her husband, with the result that Martha left for Ukiah, the county-seat, with a letter from him to a lawyer, a certain John Sampson, who, Mr. Nichols assured her, would get the divorce and not charge her overmuch.

The trip to Ukiah was to serve a double purpose. As Mrs. Nichols had prophesied, the women were gradually declining to give Martha work, and she was beginning to feel the need of a little more money, especially since the divorce would cost her something. Hop-picking, she knew, would begin in Ukiah the last week in August, and court would convene three weeks later. If she could make forty or fifty dollars picking hops, she would probably be able to pay the lawyer without touching the small reserve in Mr. Kerr's safe; so she decided to get to Ukiah in time for the hop-picking and stay there until the divorce was obtained.

She made the trip on horseback, her few necessary changes of clothing tied in a pack behind her.

The seventy miles over the mountains took her a day and a half of hard riding, since the roads were none too good and her horse anything but spirited. At South Eel River there was a small inn, which existed mainly on the few travelers who were forced to stop there for a night as they journeyed between Ukiah and Covelo. Martha had wondered fearfully if the owners would permit her to stay there, not knowing whether hostelries excluded people with Indian blood or not, but she was cordially received and no embarrassing questions were asked.

When she reached Ukiah the second afternoon, she was deeply impressed by the magnitude and splendor of the little town. The streets, although they were six inches deep with dust, were streets, not wandering, grass-grown lanes as they were in Covelo, and the sidewalks on State Street and all around the court-house were real walks made of boards. There were a number of brick buildings, too, and they were the first ones she had ever seen with the exception of one small house on the plains in Round Valley. It had been built by the Government many years before and had been used as barracks when the soldiers were sent to restrain the Indians. The court-house with its small dome, its lawns, and its palms, seemed to Martha almost overwhelming in its size, as did the two three-story brick hotels.

Mr. Nichols had advised her to stay at the Grand,

and she was thoroughly frightened when she tied her horse to the hitching-rack in the shade of the Grand Hotel's locust-trees. Would they permit a half-breed to enter such a beautiful place? Could she possibly afford to stay there? But where could she stay if they turned her out? Fairly trembling with fear, she gathered her riding-skirt in her hand, ignored the gawping men who were sitting in front of the hotel smoking or chewing tobacco, and went into the office.

The sleepy clerk behind the desk took a good look at her and woke up. She was gray with dust from her straw sailor-hat to her feet, but her eyes were blacker for the unnatural grayness of her dust-laden lashes and her lips more pink. The clerk wondered where the beauty had come from and decided on the spot that she was the prettiest Spanish girl he had ever seen.

"Want a room?" he asked, grinning a broad welcome.

Encouraged by the grin, Martha answered quietly and without undue fear, "Yes—if I can afford it."

"Oh, I guess you can afford it. We don't charge very hard. I can give you a nice room for a dollar and a half; that's with meals, of course." He grinned again, showing two buck-teeth and several more gleaming with gold. He was a homely youth with straw-like hair, pale blue eyes, and a broad, flat face that was splotched with great brown

freckles, but there was an honest friendliness in his manner and grin that gave Martha courage.

Nevertheless, she was stunned by the price he was asking. A dollar and a half a day to live! It was outrageous. Well, she could afford it for one night, and maybe she could find somebody in town who would take her in for the remainder of her stay.

"All right," she agreed. "Where can I put my horse? And where can I get a bath?"

"Right up-stairs for the bath, and you can put your horse in Smith's Stable just across the street. You 'd better take your horse over now, and when you come back I 'll show you your room and where the bath-tub is. By the way, the bath will cost you two bits extra." He turned a book toward her and held out a pen. "Please register."

For an instant Martha did not understand, but a glance at the book explained his request. She wrote her name and Covelo after it; then she took her horse to Smith's Stable and arranged for its care. She was not impressed by her room when she was shown to it. Why, it was n't any better than her parlor, and they must be charging her all of six bits a night for it; but she forgave the exorbitant cost as the room once she saw the bath-tub. It was wonderful, and the miracle of running water was almost beyond her. The bath-room was obviously a recent improvement, since it was merely part of a hallway, and its walls did not reach the ceiling. The zinc-lined

tub was large enough for her to lie at full length, and the water came out of two faucets, one hot and one cold, just as Mrs. Armstrong had told her it did. Twenty-five cents for a bath like that! It was a gift.

The next morning she hunted up John Sampson and presented her letter of introduction. He asked her a few questions, and then said crisply: "It's a plain case of non-support and desertion, and I'll be able to put it through very quickly just as soon as court convenes. I'll have to have affidavits from at least three persons, though, to supplement your testimony."

"What are affidavits?"

"Sworn statements. You'll have to give me the names of three people who can swear that you have supported yourself since you were married and that Mr. McLeod disappeared a year and a half ago and has not been in Covelo since."

"Well, there's Mr. Nichols and Mrs. Nichols and Aunt Ann Mitchell."

Sampson wrote down the names on a pad. "Very well," he said pleasantly, at the same time wondering how any man could desert so beautiful a woman. "William Holloway is the notary public up there, I believe, and I'll write to him to get the affidavits. There will be nothing for you to do until court convenes, but I'll have to know how to get hold of you when it does. Where are you staying?"

"Well, I stayed at the Grand Hotel last night, but I've got to find some other place; the hotel costs too much. Hop-picking begins Monday at the Bartlett ranch, and I'm going to work there if they'll have me. But I don't want to camp. I have n't the things."

"You want to stay in town and go to the hop-field each morning?"

"Yes. I have a horse."

"Oh, I see." The lawyer considered for a minute or so and then advised her to try Mrs. Elson at the south end of State Street. "She rents rooms, I know," he said, "and she'll probably give you room and board very reasonably. Tell her I sent you."

Mrs. Elson was a comfortable, middle-aged woman with graying hair, and she told Martha that she would be glad to have her. "You can put your horse in our barn," she said pleasantly, "and I don't think Pa will charge you much for its board. We're goin' hop-pickin' down on the Bartlett place Monday, too; that is, I and my daughter Ella are, and you can go with us."

Like the clerk in the hotel, she thought at first that Martha was Spanish, but a second thought warned her that the girl might be a half or, possibly, a quarter-breed. She decided to find out, not having the slightest intention of renting any of her rooms to an Indian.

"You're Spanish, ain't you?" she asked, her

casual manner entirely masking her suspicions. "You're so dark complected, almost as dark as an Eytalian."

Martha's heart skipped a beat, but she lied calmly. "Yes, I'm Spanish; that is, on my mother's side. My father was an Englishman."

"Oh, I see." Mrs. Elson's suspicions were completely allayed, but her curiosity was n't. "You come from Covelo, you said," she continued, rocking comfortably. "Are your folks up there?"

"No; they're both dead. I got married about three years ago, but I left my husband. He was lazy and brutal. I'm down here now to get a divorce."

Martha had no desire to confide in Mrs. Elson, but she knew at once that she was talking to a gossip and that unless she satisfied her curiosity the woman would make inquiries.

"I don't think divorce is right," Mrs. Elson observed sagely, "but a woman can't abide a mean man, and that's all there is to it." She leaned forward eagerly. "Did he beat you?"

"He did n't dare, but he was cruel just the same; and I had to support him. Besides, I have n't seen him for more than a year."

"No! Think of that! Are you gettin' married again?"

Martha smiled. "No; no, I should say not." She

rose to go. "When can I move in? I'd like to come this afternoon."

"That's all right. Just bring your things any time. Don't them hotels charge fancy prices, though? Think of it—a dollar and a half a day for room and board! They must think you're a millionaire."

For the first two days Martha found hop-picking hard work and not very remunerative, but on the third day she decided to follow Mrs. Elson's advice and dispense with her corset. From then on the work did not tire her excessively, and she proved to be an exceptionally fast picker.

She did not want to take off her corset because she had never forgotten Mrs. Nichols's advice to her when she was first married. A corset stood for respectability and self-respect; to go without one was to admit social inferiority, but picking hops bound in a corset was hardly less than agony. She had to lean over constantly to gather blossoms that had fallen on the ground, and when she bent far forward the top of the high corset cut her breast. Her back ached so badly that every move was painful.

"You'll never be able to pick hops all harnessed up like that," Mrs. Elson admonished. "It ain't sense. And you're just ruinin' that pretty gingham dress, too. Now, the sensible thing for you to do

is to ride down town and buy a calicer wrapper, and then throw it away when hop-pickin' 's over."

Inwardly rebelling, Martha bought the wrapper and laid her corset aside. She looked a fright, she admitted to herself, but how comfortable she felt and how easily she could work! She took deep breaths and turned her body this way and that in sheer delight. She had never realized how awful a corset was until she was without one.

She enjoyed her experience in the hop-fields, although the work was monotonous. She was up every morning at five and in the fields by six. With Ella Elson, a sixteen-year-old girl, as her partner, she would start work on a row of vines, Ella picking on one side and she on the other. They picked into coffee-sacks which were held open by barrel-hoops sewed into the mouths. A cord tied around their waists held the hoops firmly against their stomachs. When they had filled the coffee-sacks, they emptied them into larger sacks supplied by their employers. At noon and at six o'clock the large sacks were weighed and the weight entered into a little book that each picker carried.

They worked twelve hours a day, the hot sun blazing down on them and the rough vines tearing their fingers in spite of the heavy gloves they wore. Up and down the rows they stumbled over the heavy clods of earth, stripping the young streamers with one sweep of the hand, bending over or kneeling to

gather up the fallen blossoms, while their skins seemed to shrivel in the heat and their eyes ached in the glaring light. But everybody was exuberantly happy; boys and girls shouted back and forth comparing their progress; they burst periodically into song, and whole acres of pickers would take it up; they shared lunches and told stories; they found time to rough-house each other and shriek with laughter. Picking hops was not only a means of earning some desirable money; it was also a vacation time, and nearly everybody in Ukiah hurried to the fields the day picking was announced. Whole families went, and children five years old filled their flour-sacks with the blossoms that their mothers scattered on the ground.

Martha earned fifty dollars, a very large sum, and she felt that she had had the best time that she had ever had in her life. The Elsons were kind to her, her body was perfectly comfortable, and for once nobody knew anything about her Indian blood. She was accepted completely, not merely suffered to exist. Her blood froze the first time she saw some Round Valley Indians in the field, but when she ignored them they gave no indication of ever having seen her before.

She had to quit work one day early to appear in court. She had rather feared the experience, but she was so unpleasantly conscious of her corset that she hardly knew what was happening. As a matter

of fact, nothing much did. She was sworn in and asked a few questions, Mr. Sampson presented the affidavits, and the judge remarked casually that it was a clear case. Then Mr. Sampson told her that she was free to return to Covelo and that he would send her the papers later.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked as they left the court-room together.

"Um—well, call it ten dollars."

Martha paid him, inwardly deciding that he was a robber. How could a man ask so much for just a few minutes' work? She never knew that Mr. Nichols had written to Sampson and given him explicit directions. "Don't charge Mrs. McLeod more than ten dollars," he wrote. "She can't afford to pay more. I'll pay you the rest of it, but don't you dare hint of this transaction to her if you value me as a client. My wife has given me my orders, and I am passing them on to you."

Martha returned to the Elsons' and proceeded to make the pack of her clothing, as she was to leave early the next morning. She had an unpleasant experience, however, before she got away. Mrs. Elson, she noticed, seemed suddenly to have become very cold in her manner, tight-lipped and distant. Nothing was said until Martha was on her horse in the early morning ready to depart.

Mrs. Elson stood by the gate and watched her mount the horse.

"Good-by, Mrs. Elson," Martha said, her voice warm with gratitude. "You've been mighty kind to me."

"Don't come again." The words tinkled like falling icicles.

"What?" Martha leaned forward, thinking that she had misunderstood.

"I said not to come again."

"Why, Mrs. Elson, what's the matter? What have I done?"

"I saw Mrs. Burrage yesterday."

"Mrs. Burrage?"

"Yes, Mrs. Abner Burrage from Covelo. She told me all about you." She opened her mouth to let loose a flood of denunciation, but, suddenly changing her mind, she contented herself with, "I don't take in squaws."

Martha looked at her a second, so hurt that the tears burned her eyes; then she lifted her head proudly, touched the horse with the oak switch in her hand, and was away down the road, the dust swirling heavily around her. The whole beautiful three weeks were spoiled, and Mrs. Elson's final remark tortured Martha for months.

She made South Eel River that night and Covelo the next day, and at South Eel River she put on her corset again, feeling as she did so that she was binding herself into slavery. For some reason unknown to her, the corset had become a symbol. For a brief

time in Ukiah she had felt actually free, and during that time she had been without a corset, so that corsets, besides the discomfort they caused in themselves, seemed to stand for the bonds which wrapped her about in Covelo. She had taken off her corset and put on the wrapper the moment she got back to the Elsons from court, and she yearned to finish her journey in sloppy comfort, but pride and fear of criticism forbade. She thought of taking the wrapper with her. "It's so comfortable to work in," she argued with her pride. But pride answered, "Too comfortable"; so, pressing her lips determinedly together, she opened the window and threw the wrapper out on the hillside.

Her divorce caused a little ripple of excitement in Round Valley, the women being strangely divided in their opinion about it. Some of them thought that a divorced woman was no better than a harlot and said so, but some of them thought that now that Martha was legally separated from her husband it was quite proper for her to live alone.

But life was hard in the year that followed: the women were cold, work was scarce, and she was at times almost unbearably lonely. During the winter, snow piled around her door, icicles hung from the eaves, and the wind coming from the snowy mountains cut through the thin boards of the unplastered house. She had to buy wood, five cords at a time, and it seemed impossible to earn the money to pay

for it. Dollar by dollar she drew her savings out of Mr. Kerr's safe, and before spring finally came she began to have hours when she was lost in terror.

Spring eventually arrived, however, and the valley blossomed into a mountain paradise. First the snowdrops, as white and cold as the snow itself, nodded delicately among the pale green blades of the new grass. Martha knew that the johnny-jump-ups were blooming in the hills, that tiny ferns were slowly uncurling, that redbells and bluebells and dog-tooth violets, mariposa-lilies, wild violets and pansies, stiff red fire-crackers and spotted tiger-lilies would soon fleck the hillsides with spots of color or hide in the deep, cool recesses of the cañons. Then as the snow melted from the mountains and the creeks swelled into muddy torrents, the poppies came, turning every untilled acre into blazing gold, their proud yellow chalices opening full to the warm sunshine and standing arrogantly away from the humble blue lupine and the modest purple larkspur.

The women blossomed with the flowers, and Martha suddenly found herself once more earning money, not so much as she once had earned but enough to support herself in moderate comfort. Some of the women who had formerly employed her remained stiffly aloof, preferring, they said, to have their clothes made by a respectable woman; but enough of the women sacrificed their scruples to their vanity to permit Martha to earn an honest living.

There was no real change in conditions for another year, and then they changed with a rush. The women got tired of talking about her, but their coldness never thawed until she met Wallace Gardner. But when that meeting finally did occur, and Wallace showed publicly his respect and admiration for her, all the coldness did thaw into a flowing stream of courtesy and kindness.

CHAPTER XIV

GEORGE WHITE, the richest man in Round Valley and one of the richest in Mendocino County, was getting old, and Wallace Gardner was commonly considered his probable successor in importance and wealth. Wallace's father had left him a fine ranch well stocked with sheep and cattle; but in the ten years following his father's death Wallace had swelled the acres of the ranch from hundreds into thousands and increased a comfortable inheritance into a small fortune. He was a rare combination, an expert farmer and a keen business man. When other ranchers lost their lambs in a snow-storm, Wallace's were safe in a corral; when other farmers put in corn, he sowed his fields with wheat; and when his neighbors gave up in despair, the corn-crop having been a complete failure, he bought their farms and made them grow five blades of grass and three sheep where one had grown before. He found, too, that his surplus money could be easily and satisfactorily invested in mortgages, with the result that his power over the farmers was gradually growing into respectful importance.

He was a sturdy, blond man, thirty-four years old, and, to the wonder of the village, unmarried. Since

his father's death he had been too busy to think of marriage, and a painful shyness made him draw timidly away from women. He was considered the catch of the valley, and there was not a mother with an eligible daughter who did not invite him at least once a month to her Sunday dinner. So much did those dinners and the daughters distress him that he often thought of staying away from church to escape the invitations, but he was a religious man and church was a necessary part of his life. He never missed a Sunday service except at lambing time, and although he had liked Mr. Armstrong, he had been glad when he left, because the new minister had nothing to do with the reservation and gave his entire time to his parochial duties. There was now a Sunday morning service, and Wallace often attended it as well as the one in the evening.

For years he had known who Martha was, but he had never paid any attention to her except to decide casually that she was the prettiest girl that he had ever seen. He knew that she was a half-breed who had been cared for by the Armstrongs, that she had married that worthless vaquero McLeod and divorced him, and he had heard vague rumors about her from time to time that did not interest him.

One Sunday morning as he was leaving the church he saw Martha standing with Mrs. Nichols and her husband. As he passed them, he touched his hat and murmured a greeting.

"Oh, Wally!" Mrs. Nichols called after him; "come here."

He turned and joined the group, a little abashed by Martha's presence.

"Do you know Mrs. McLeod? If you don't, it's high time you did." Mr. Nichols grinned at his wife's manner, Wallace blushed and bowed, and Martha said quietly that she was glad to meet him.

"Have any of the mothers hooked you up for dinner to-day, Wally?" Mrs. Nichols asked banteringly. "Some of 'em 'll grab you yet if you don't watch out. How many fried chickens have you eaten while mama showed you all of daughter's paces?"

"Stop it, Nancy," her husband exclaimed as Wallace's blushes burned into scarlet. "Have some mercy on the poor man, can't you? What the woman is getting at is this, Wally: she wants you to come to dinner at our house. I don't know if we're going to have chicken, but I do know that we have n't any daughter to worry you."

"No, we have n't a daughter, worse luck," said Mrs. Nichols, "but we're going to have Martha to-day. Now, Wally, take one good look at Martha and see if you dare to come."

Martha, embarrassed, lowered her eyes, and Mrs. Nichols laughed at her confusion and Wallace's obvious consternation.

"You act like a couple of scared children," she teased, laughing gaily. "Don't be such ninnies. Did

you come in the buggy to-day, Wally, or on horse-back?"

"In the buggy."

"All right, then; I'll go with you, and Lester can take Martha in our rig. Come on."

As the meal progressed, Wallace's shyness thawed in the warmth of Mrs. Nichols's informal chatter and her husband's quiet hospitality. He enjoyed himself, and most of all he enjoyed looking at the beautiful girl across the table from him. How strange, he thought, that he had never really noticed before how wonderful she was!

She was wearing a delicate pink lawn dress that vivified her dusky beauty and made her seem very young in spite of her quiet dignity. She said little during the meal or after it. Her glowing black eyes, however, were eloquent with interest and understanding; her pink lips parted occasionally in a shy smile; and once or twice she laughed softly at Mrs. Nichols's flippant remarks. Wally, marveling at her repose, was fascinated by the suggestion of intensity that she somehow conveyed.

He took her home in the middle of the afternoon in his buggy, and although their conversation was both slight and inconsequential, every word she said seemed to him freighted with importance and alive with meaning. For the first time a woman had really captured his fancy, and so complete was the

capture that it conquered his shyness and gave him courage to make a request.

"Are you going to church to-night?" he asked as he stopped the horse at her gate.

"Yes, I think so."

Wally blushed but said bravely, "Will you go with me?"

Martha looked at the horse's tail and considered.

"I don't think I'd better," she said slowly at last. "You know, Mr. Gardner, people have a way of talking about me. I don't know why—but they do, and if you take me to church, they will talk some more." She faced him and said honestly, "I'd like to go with you, but I don't think I'd better."

"Oh, that's not right," he expostulated. "I want to take you, and you want to go with me; so why should n't we go together? There's nothing wrong about it. What can people say, anyhow?"

Martha knew well enough what people would say, and she wanted none of their gossip; but somehow she could n't bring herself to explain to Wally that the good women would whisper that they never thought Wallace Gardner would be seen with a half-breed and that they had always thought that he was a moral man.

"It's awfully nice of you," she murmured, "but I don't think I'd better."

"Well, can I see you home from church, then?"

He was a little hurt by her refusal but determined to know her better. He *had* to know her; that was all.

Martha climbed out of the buggy and turned to smile at him.

"Don't blame me if people gossip," she said warningly. "All right; meet me after church. Good-by."

He touched the horse with the whip, his face lighting with a sudden smile. "Oh, thanks," he exclaimed, delighted. "Good-by."

He did see her home after church, and people did talk; but he heard none of the gossip and would not have been in the least disturbed by it if he had. Wallace Gardner, notwithstanding his business acumen, was essentially a simple soul, almost entirely without imagination or prejudice. He believed implicitly in the Golden Rule and blunderingly tried to follow it. When he was asked his religion, he always replied that he was a Presbyterian. As a matter of fact, he made an honest effort to be a Christian.

He knew that Martha was a half-breed, but he did not find that fact particularly interesting. If she was good enough for Mrs. Nichols, he guessed that she was good enough for him; and as the summer Sundays followed each other, he was finally convinced that she was far too good for him. He had gone through the local grammar-school and done good work there, he read the "San Francisco

Chronicle" and several farm journals, but he soon found that his education was inferior to Martha's, and he was honest enough with himself to admit it. Her musical gifts seemed to him uncanny, and he was dumb with admiration for her love of everything beautiful. Flowers and weeds were much the same to him, something to be rooted out of his fields; but Martha exclaimed in wonder over a buttercup or over the pale yellow glory of a field of wild mustard. He was awed by her emotion because he could n't understand it. Wild mustard made pretty good stewed greens, he said; but it was awful hard to get out of a field, and he had never thought it was much to look at.

Before a month had passed, he knew that he was in love with Martha and that he wanted to marry her. He took her to church every Sunday morning and for a ride in his buggy in the afternoon. At first Martha had been hesitant about accepting his invitations, but when she heard no gossip, she lost her fear and ceased to demur. It was wonderful to have this kindly man near her after her years of loneliness, and he gave her a feeling of comfort and safety that she had never known before.

There had been gossip a plenty when Wally began to appear at church with Martha, but it stopped almost as soon as it began. The husbands laid down the law. Some of them were already in debt to Wallace Gardner, and the rest expected to be at

any time. There was hardly a man in the valley who could afford to antagonize him, and most of them told their wives with great frankness to keep their mouths shut, a number of them adding that the women would be darned nice to Martha McLeod, too, if they knew which side their bread was buttered on.

The life of a Round Valley farmer's wife was so hard that she knew exactly the upper side of a piece of bread; and since bread was not always plentiful, she was more than eager to spread it with butter by any means possible. The result was that Martha suddenly found herself not only courteously treated but actually courted. She was offered more work than she could take care of, she was repeatedly asked to sing in church, and there was even some discussion, she learned from Aunt Ann, of asking her to join the Eastern Star. If that invitation had been given, all of Martha's aspirations would have been satisfied. One woman had killed the suggestion so effectively, however, that Martha's name never even came up for a ballot. "Since when is she related to a Mason?" she had asked sharply. "She is n't Wally Gardner's wife yet. Wait until she is." And they had unanimously agreed to wait.

If Martha could have made up her mind to marry Wally, she would have been quite happy, but she could not make up her mind. She knew that he was

in love with her; she felt sure that he was going to ask her to marry him; and she was perfectly aware of all that such a marriage would mean to her. Every woman in the valley would call on her, she would have a lovely home, she would be asked to the dances and invited to join the Eastern Star and the Dorcas Aid Society; she would be above criticism—the first lady of Covelo. Here was complete triumph waiting for her nod—and she hesitated. She liked and admired Wally, but she was afraid of him, at times almost terrified by the ardor in his blue eyes.

His blondness reminded her of Dan, and Dan had left a scar on her soul that had never healed. Wally's nose was n't crooked, and his nostrils did n't strain back sensually, but his hair was yellow and his eyes blue—and his eyes burned sometimes when he touched her hand. He was always clumsily respectful and never attempted the slightest familiarity, but Martha could not forget those nights with Dan. She dared not risk them with another man.

She held him off until August, but even his patience had a limit, and the time came when he asked her outright to marry him.

They had been to a Sunday evening service, and as usual Wally had seen her home, but he varied his practice by not saying good night to her at the gate.

"Won't you let me come in a little while, Martha?" he asked. "I want to talk to you about something important."

"I don't think you'd better," she hesitated. "It's pretty late."

"I know, Martha, but I promise not to stay long, and this is so important that I can't wait another week. I'm so busy on the ranch just now that I can't get in for a week-day. Please let me come in for just a little while."

There was so much urgency in his voice and manner that Martha relented, although she was afraid of what she knew he was going to say.

After she had lighted the lamp and seated herself opposite him, there were a few minutes of awkward silence while Wally gripped his hands nervously together. Finally he cleared his throat and spoke.

"I guess you know, Martha, how much I think of you," he began. His face flushed until it was crimson and then went slowly white. "I—I think more of you than anybody else in the world, I guess. My mother died when I was fifteen, you know, and I have n't cared anything about any other woman since. You're the first one."

Disturbed and confused, Martha looked unhappily at her lap while he was speaking. "Yes, Wally," she murmured.

"I—I want you to marry me, Martha." He

leaned forward, ardent and tense as he added simply, "I love you."

Martha sat silent for a minute or two, and she did not look up when she spoke. "I know, Wally," she said at last. "I know you love me, and—and I'm proud. I don't know about getting married, though."

"Why not, Martha? Why not? Don't you love me?"

She looked up then and replied honestly: "I don't know. I respect you more than any man I've ever known outside of Mr. Armstrong, and I think that I'm fonder of you than I was of him, though he did everything in the world for me. But I don't know whether I love you or not; I just don't know."

Wally's blue eyes clouded with disappointment. "I don't want to force you, Martha," he said pathetically, "but—oh, Lord, I don't know how I can live without you!"

His tenderness and humility gave her courage to speak with a frankness that she never would have thought possible.

"Have you thought, Wally, what it will mean to marry me?" she demanded, her voice almost harsh.

"Why—why, what do you mean?"

She clasped her hands and looked at the floor, her courage failing her for an instant, but finally she raised her eyes and looked at him with real affection.

"Listen, Wally," she said softly; "I'm going to

say something that I thought I'd never say to any one—not even to Mrs. Armstrong. My mother is an Indian. She's living right now up in Summit Valley with a white man named Colfax. Have you ever thought what will happen to you in this valley if you marry a half-breed?" Her face turned ashy gray as she said the last word, and her eyes filled with tears of shame.

Wally sat suddenly erect as if she had slapped him. "Martha!" he cried. "Martha, why did you say that? Don't you suppose I knew? Do you think for one minute that it makes any difference to me? Oh, Martha, I love you. Nothing else matters."

She wiped the tears out of her eyes and replied firmly, almost coldly: "Yes, it does. I know, Wally. Listen. I thought I loved Dan McLeod. I guess I did n't know what love was; maybe I don't know now, but I thought I loved him then, and"—she shivered miserably—"it was terrible. I can't take another chance without being sure. I just can't—that's all."

"But it is n't a chance, Martha," he pleaded. "I'll be good to you. I swear I will. I'll give you everything you want. I'll build a new house, and I'll make it the best one in the valley. I'll put up a windmill so 's we can have running water, and I'll put in a big zinc tub like Mrs. Nichols has, and I'll get you a girl to do the work. I'll take you to San Francisco—anywhere you want to go. Oh, Martha,

I'll do anything in the world for you. Please, Martha, can't you love me a little?"

"I don't know; I don't know, Wally. Give me time, won't you? Please let me think about it." Tears trembled on her lashes and trickled down her cheeks. "I've got to think," she whispered.

Her tears terrified Wally. "Don't cry, Martha," he pleaded, leaning forward and taking her hand gently. "Please don't cry. I'll give you all the time you want; months, if you say so. But don't cry. I can't stand it."

She disengaged her hand and dried her eyes.

"I'm sorry I cried. I don't think I ever did before." She managed a little smile. "But it's all so hard, Wally. You don't know how hard it is."

Her smile reassured him, and he was almost happy as he rose to go. "It's all right just as long as you let me see you and let me have a chance. I've got to be going along, and I promise I won't say anything more about it just now. You'll go to church with me next Sunday, won't you?"

"Of course." She held out her hand, feeling curiously formal. "Good night, Wally. I think you're the best man I know."

He had forgotten his shyness in his ardor, but her compliment brought it back with a rush of color to his cheeks.

"Aw, Martha, don't say that." He tried to think of an appropriate parting speech, but not a word

came; so he squeezed her hand fervently, mumbled, "Good night," and backed awkwardly out of the door.

In the weeks that followed, Martha thought long and deeply. Her affection and respect for Wally were genuine, and at times she believed her fears absurd. Then would come memories of Dan's caresses, augmented apparently by her brief respite from them. The comforts Wally offered her were not to be despised, and she longed for the social position that marriage with him would bring, but she had sold herself once to gratify her social aspirations, and she dared not sell herself again. She liked Wally, she admired him, but he struck no spark in her; he left her cold to think and fear.

Eventually, however, she decided to marry him, but even after she had made the decision, she hesitated about making it known to Wally. Instinctively, he had wooed her in the wisest way possible, never rushing her, never attempting caresses; and his tender, respectful attitude finally smothered her fear of him. Each week she decided that she would tell him that she would be his wife, and each week she postponed the telling, afraid to make her decision final by giving expression to it.

CHAPTER XV

THE first week in September Covelo roused itself out of its usual lethargy to enjoy four days of excitement. August had been a dead month after the thrills that July had afforded. There had been a fire in July, a murder, and a cattle war, not to mention the Glorious Fourth. For a time the fire had threatened the village, since the bucket-brigade, stretching for a hundred yards from the town well to the burning house, could do little to kill the flames; but eventually the house burned satisfactorily to the ground without destroying the adjoining property. A white man had shot an Indian in a fight over a squaw and had retired discreetly to the mountains while the sheriff made the necessary formal visit to Covelo. When he had gone, the murderer calmly returned to the valley and the squaw. The Fourth had been celebrated with a bonfire, the shooting of fire-crackers and dozens of revolvers, and a two-day period of drunkenness that astonished even Round Valley. As for the cattle war, it was supposed to be still in progress, but since no open fighting had taken place for a month the village had almost forgotten it.

Covelo had enjoyed July, but August by contrast

had been horribly dull; so the races in September were welcomed with unusual delight. The track on the plains in the west of the valley was none too good, but it would serve, and the horses were brought from as far south as Santa Rosa. Professional gamblers poured into Covelo, wearing long tan "dusters," linen coats that hung to their shoe-tops, and proceeded to show their skill at cards and betting. Roulette-wheels were installed at the track, "con" men plied successfully their various trades, and for four afternoons every man, woman, and child who could scrape together fifty cents hurried through the deep dust to the races.

Wally took Martha the last afternoon. He paid the admission at the gate and then walked beside her, carefully guiding her by the arm as they picked a path through the crowd and the dust toward the grand stand. In a way the scene was picturesque, the squaws lending most of the color. They were in holiday attire, and their dresses were as vivid and sharp as splotches of paint on an artist's palette. A squaw found no beauty in pastel shades, no half-tones for her; instead, bright green waists topped scarlet skirts, yellow dresses flamed with blue ribbon, and red or green bandana handkerchiefs covered their heads, making sudden spots of color against the black shirts that most of the men wore. Nearly every squaw had a papoose in a white willow basket on her back, and most of them had sev-

eral children clinging to their skirts. The vaqueros swirled around the gaming-tables, their big Stetson hats bobbing excitedly, their chaps, usually of white or orange wool, making a cool contrast to the crude, burning colors of the squaws' dresses.

As Wally and Martha passed a roulette-wheel, around which a crowd was gathered, they paused in surprise as a man suddenly roared with laughter.

"Damn it," he cried; "I've won again. That makes ten times straight. Pay up, big boy." He held out both hands and chuckled teasingly as the croupier silently filled them with gold and silver.

The speaker was obviously a vaquero, a tall, lean man in his early twenties, with orange-colored wool chaps and the usual red bandana handkerchief carelessly knotted around his throat. His big hat was pushed back on his head, and the handle of a revolver gleamed boldly from his hip pocket. Frank Cross was his name, and he had a bad reputation and a great many friends. Everybody liked him for his joyous laugh, his gay diablerie, his generosity and honesty; but everybody feared his quick temper and his skill with a gun. He was known to have been implicated in the recent cattle war, and there was a rumor that he had killed two men.

Martha and Wally paused to watch the merry youngster lay his bets. He won again, and again he roared with boyish laughter. He noticed Wally and turned to him, grinning gleefully.

"Take a chance, Wally," he cried. "Don't be so durned careful all the time. Come on, you old moss-back; I'll stake you."

Wally shook his head. "Not on your life, Frank," he responded. "You'd better quit, too, while you're ahead. You'll be broke in a minute if you don't look out."

"Not me! Broke? Say, Wally, I'm goin' to be rich. Just watch me!" He turned to the croupier. "You watch, too, big boy." The crowd around the table stared as he emptied his pockets into gleaming piles of gold and silver. "Every last cent of her goes down this time. Watch me bust the bank." He laughed excitedly and laid his bets. The bystanders gasped in amazement and admiration, crowding closer around the table to see the outcome. Cross lost, and the croupier, smiling quietly, raked the money to him.

Martha edged as close as possible to the table, breathlessly interested. Wally's murmur of protest at the size of the bet had irritated her, and she found herself praying that Cross would win. A sigh of disappointment broke from her when he lost, but she was immediately reassured by his laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared, snatching off his hat and waving it wildly over his head. "Hurrah for me! Ha, ha, ha!"

His laughter was so contagious that every one joined in with him, and in a minute the crowd was

laughing and chuckling as if something inordinately funny had happened. Every one, that is, except Wally; he smiled slightly and shook his head. Gambling was wrong, anyhow, he thought, and it was downright sinful to throw money away for nothing.

Cross pulled an enormous red cotton handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his face and black curls. "What do you know about that?" he exclaimed, apparently to Wally, but his dark eyes sought Martha. "Say, Wally, loan me a ten-spot. I want to bet on me and Hell Fire."

At first Wally was reluctant to send good money after bad, but when Martha exclaimed, "Oh, please do, Wally," he produced his purse and handed Cross a ten-dollar gold piece.

"Thanks. Thank you, too, miss. You're goin' to bring me luck." He looked at her admiringly, and his lips parted in a smile that was so care-free, so boyish, that Martha laughed softly in response. "I'll see you after the race, Wally, and pay you the ten-spot. So-long." And he was almost instantly lost in the swirling crowd of white people, Indians, and breeds.

"Who is he?" Martha asked as she and Wally made their way slowly up the rickety steps of the wooden grand stand.

"Frank Cross," he replied, helping her carefully as she sat down. "He's a vaquero; the best in the

valley, too. Did n't you see him break Hell Fire a month ago?"

"Oh, is he the vaquero that broke that beautiful black horse in front of the Updegraff place?"

"Yes, Hell Fire 's a man-killer. Cal Simms owned him, and he was going to shoot him because he 's so dangerous. Well, Frank guaranteed to ride him for fifty dollars, and he did."

"I know," she said breathlessly. "I saw it. I never saw such riding. Why, when that terrible black horse began to buck, I thought he 'd get killed sure, but he stuck on and stuck on until the horse just gave up and stood there shaking and quivering all over. It was wonderful."

"Yes, it was," agreed Wally, "and he 's got that horse so 's it 'll eat out of his hand, but nobody else dares go near it. Cal can't do anything with it, and nobody else on the ranch can, either, except Frank; so last week Cal sold it to Frank for fifty dollars. He 's named it Hell Fire, and he 's going to ride it to-day in the vaquero race. He 'll win, too."

"Oh, I hope so!" And for a vague instant Martha wondered at her own excitement.

The judge clanged the bell, and the horses for the first race were called to the line. Martha was thrilled by the slender, dancing horses; the little jockeys in their black boots, tight white trousers, and brilliantly colored silk shirts; she was thrilled by the races themselves, especially by the ladies' race

in which a mother and daughter, the two best women riders in the valley, competed against each other, riding side-saddle and with the daring of men; she was thrilled by the shouting book-makers and the excitement of the roulette-wheels; but most of all she was thrilled by the vaquero race in which Frank Cross, riding his black devil of a horse as if they were one, flashed under the wire three lengths a winner. She found herself on her feet screaming hysterically and waving her handkerchief. After the race was over, she was suddenly weak and spent.

She paid little attention to the race that followed, although it was the closest of the day, waiting curiously alert for Frank Cross to appear and pay his debt to Wally.

Finally he came. "Here 's your ten, Wally," he said, holding out the gold piece and grinning triumphantly. "I told you I 'd win. I got a hundred-dollar prize, and I won twenty with your ten."

Wally put the money in his purse. "You 're a good rider all right, Frank," he said, "but an awful fool about throwing your money away. Won't you sit down? Do you know Mrs. McLeod?"

"What do you s'pose I was hangin' around for?" he demanded, showing his even white teeth in his boyish smile. "I ain't never met Mrs. McLeod, but you bet I know who she is." He swept off his hat and held out his hand. "I 'm glad to meet you, ma'am."

"I'm glad to meet you," Martha responded, her voice hardly more than a whisper. There was a little pulse beating in her throat that seemed to choke her. She winced under his pressure of her hand, but she made no effort to withdraw it until his loosened.

He sat with her and Wally until the races were over, chattering and laughing with undiminished exuberance. Words seemed to bubble out of him as if he were too happy to contain them; smiles and laughter were a part of his speech; and his chuckles swelled into a joyous shout that made every one in hearing distance smile in sympathy. He was only twenty-three years old, and he seemed ten years younger.

"Is n't he just like a small boy?" Martha asked Wally when the last race had been run and Frank had left them.

"Let's go this way," he said, for the moment ignoring her question while he steered her carefully through the crowd. "Gosh, is n't this dust awful? Oh, yes, Frank. . . . Sure, he's nothing but a kid. Here's my buggy. Let's get away before the crowd starts racing back to town." He helped her into the buggy, drove carefully through the masses of departing people, and, as soon as he was free of them, turned down a side road. Every one on horseback, he knew, would enter into a wild race back to the village, and the main road was no place for a buggy.

"Where does he come from?" Martha asked, once they were out of the crowd.

"Who?"

"This Frank Cross."

"Oh—Frank! Oh, he comes from down Healdsburg way, I think. He's only been up here a year or two. He works for Cal Simms on his ranch up north of the valley, and he is n't in Covelo much, I guess. He's got a funny story."

"What do you mean, a funny story?" Neither she nor Wally noticed how intensely interested she was. She was much too interested to be aware of the interest, and Wally was too unobservant to note it.

"Why, I was down Santa Rosa way about six months back," he began, "and just by chance I happened to hear about him. Seems that he's one eighth Indian. 'Way back a Spaniard took up with a squaw. I don't know how many children they had, but one of 'em was a girl, anyway, 'cause she took up with one of the Russians when they were on the Coast. You know they used to have a settlement over there. Well, they had some children, and one of the girls married a man named Cross. I did n't hear much about him, but I guess he was all right. Anyhow, he was Frank's father, and he died a few years back. So did his wife. They told me in Santa Rosa that Frank was a terror in school

when he was a youngster and that he was always getting into some scrape or other."

Martha smiled. "I'll bet he was. He does n't look like much of a terror now, though."

"Oh, is n't he! I know him; he's worked for me. There's not a better worker in the valley than Frank, and he does n't drink much, either, but he'd gamble away his shirt. And he's an awful fighter when he gets mad."

"You mean with his fists, don't you?" Martha asked, a worried look in her eyes.

"Fists or guns; it don't make any difference to Frank. Why, you know the cattle war that's been going on between Simms's men and George Keene's. I guess there's no doubt that Keene's been rustling Cal's cattle, and his vaqueros have been after Keene's crew hot. Keene swears that Frank shot Nate Burnham and Pete Smith. Nate's all right now, but I guess Pete's in a bad way. That's the half-breed they call Pomo Pete, you know, because he's half Pomo." He flushed and looked away, having suddenly remembered that Martha was half Pomo, too.

It never entered her head, however, that there was any similarity between herself and the half-breed called Pomo Pete. "Why, he's killed half a dozen men himself, has n't he?" she demanded indignantly. "It would be a good thing if somebody did shoot him."

"Well, maybe it would," Wally agreed doubtfully, relieved to find that he had not offended her. "He 's a bad hombre; there 's no doubt about that—about the worst in the valley. But I don't hold with killing anybody, even Pete, though I 'm not going to cry much if he dies. He 's rustled some of my cattle; I 'll bet on it. Say, here we are at your house already. Have n't we been fast, though? Nelly certainly can trot."

"She 's the best buggy-horse I ever saw," Martha said warmly as she rose to get out of the buggy. When she had safely descended, she thanked Wally for having taken her to the races, saying truthfully that she never had had a better time.

"That 's fine," he exclaimed, glowing with pleasure. "You 'll go to church with me to-morrow morning?"

"Of course." A smile accompanied the words, but there was a vague look in her eyes that escaped Wally.

In the days that followed she was haunted by Frank Cross's laugh and the joyous sparkle of his dark eyes, and she often found herself smiling as she sat at her work. When she neither heard of him nor saw him for two weeks, however, she gradually ceased to think of him.

The weeks went by in their usual way: she was up early and about her housework; she dug in her garden and cared for her few chickens; she went

daily to some house on week-days to sew and to church on Sunday with Wally; and as the Sundays followed one another into the late fall he began to urge her for an answer. Not understanding her own hesitancy, she held him off, rather ashamed of herself and admitting it.

"I think I'm going to say yes, Wally," she told him frankly, "and I ought n't to treat you this way; I know it. You've been fine and awfully patient, but I don't want to say yes until I'm sure, and I'm not sure. I don't know why I'm not, either. Give me a little more time, please." Wally protested, but, fearful of losing her, he agreed to wait a little longer.

Aunt Ann called on Martha nearly every evening and retailed the latest village gossip. One night in October after Ann had gone, Martha got out her sewing and began to stitch industriously. A few minutes later there was a sharp knock at the door. She lifted the lamp from the table and, carrying it carefully, opened the door to admit her visitor. Her eyes opened wide in surprise when she saw Frank Cross.

"How do!" he cried, his face wrinkling into a pert smile. "I've come to see you. You goin' to let me in?"

"Of course. Come in." She suddenly felt happy, her whole body seeming to glow with pleasure.

"I'd 'a' been around before," he explained once

he was seated in a comfortable rocking-chair, "but I 've been workin' mighty hard out on Cal Simms's place, and I ain't had a chance to get into town since the races. But I 've been doin' a heap of thinkin' about you; I 'll tell you that."

Martha laughed softly to hide her embarrassment and delight. He had been thinking about her, and he had called the first time he got to town. That was wonderful, so wonderful that she was a little afraid.

"I 'm awfully flattered," she said with a light gaiety that was normally foreign to her. "Tell me about Hell Fire, won't you? He 's the most beautiful horse I 've even seen, and Wally Gardner says that nobody dares go near him but you."

"I 'll say not? Why, that hoss . . . " And for an hour he talked about Hell Fire, singing the praises of his horse with lyric fervor. Eventually, however, he brought the conversation back to Martha.

"I 've got to be goin' pretty pronto," he said, looking at a huge silver watch; "so don't you get me talkin' about Hell Fire again. What do I want to talk about a hoss for, anyhow, with you around?" He grinned impishly. "You know durned well that I did n't ride no twenty miles down here jes' to talk to you about my hoss."

"Well," demanded Martha, conscious of her own daring, "what did you come for?"

Frank threw back his head and laughed. "Say, that 's a poser, ain't it?" he cried. "Durned if I know what I came for. I could n't get you outta my head, and so I jes' cinched a saddle on Hell Fire and come hellin' down here to see you. I don't know jes' what I did expect." Again he smiled, and again mischievous little imps danced in his black eyes. "A kiss mebbe."

Martha blushed, but she was not offended. Wally had once asked humbly to kiss her, and she had refused him so definitely that he had never dared repeat the request, but he had asked for the kiss in the manner of one pleading for supreme unction; this man asked for it just for the joy of the kiss.

"Don't be silly," she admonished, almost maternal in her manner; but that little pulse was thrilling once more in her throat, and she stole a wistful glance at his teasing lips.

"Silly! Ho! I ain't silly. Say, Martha—you don't mind me callin' yuh Martha, do yuh? And don't you call me Mr. Cross again or I'll bawl in your lap. Now, say, listen. I ain't silly. You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen, and of course I wantta kiss you."

Martha lowered her lashes to hide the pleasure she was sure was shining in her eyes, and she tried to be severe as she responded primly, "I suppose you say that to every girl you meet."

He considered carefully before replying. "Well,

no, not every girl. Some of 'em ain't pretty, you know. Some of 'em are pretty, though, and then I wantta kiss 'em. You're the prettiest of the lot, and I wantta kiss you most of all."

Martha suddenly felt very gay; she wanted to tease him, to tantalize him. "That's what Mrs. Flynn calls blarney," she cried. "It's blarney; that's all."

"Mrs. Flynn's Irish, I guess, and I'm part Irish, too. My grandmother's sister's husband was Irish. You see how it is. Well, every Irishman likes to kiss pretty girls. There ain't many pretty girls in Round Valley, though," he added dolefully, "and it's pretty tough." He stood up and reached for her hand, but she drew it firmly away. "Aw, come on, Martha," he urged; "I've just gotta kiss yuh."

She had to laugh at his insistence and at his naïveté; his frankness made it somehow impossible to take offense.

"Oh, no, you don't have to," she replied, rising and putting her chair between them. "I don't let men kiss me, and I'm not going to start with you. You kiss the other girls but leave me alone."

"Some of the girls are too fat and some of 'em are too skinny," he protested, "but you're jes' right. Aw, come on, Martha," and he moved eagerly toward her.

Quite unafraid of him, she laughed again and backed away. "Don't be silly, Frank, please. Go

home now and come again soon, but don't spoil everything by being mean."

"I 'm not mean. It ain't mean to kiss a girl. It 's durned nice, if you ask me. All right, I 'll go now if you say so, but I 'll tell you right now, Martha, I 'm comin' again jes' as soon as I can, and you 're goin' to be nicer to me. I 'm crazy about you, and I 'm goin' to be terrible sick if you ain't nicer."

Again Martha laughed. It seemed as if everything he said made her laugh, and after he had gone she laughed some more, giggling softly to herself. He was so like a boy, a great big boy with a tanned face and freckles on his nose, and tousled curly hair; just like a boy. And he really wanted to kiss her; she knew he did, and she knew, too, that some day she would let him. Not too soon, though; oh, not too soon! She had never wanted anything so much as to have him kiss her; his smiling lips were almost irresistible: she was hungry for them, but she would nurse her hunger, letting it grow and grow until it was almost pain—then she would satisfy it. . . .

Smiling happily, she took the lamp into the bedroom and began to undress. As she stood before the bureau braiding her long hair, she was struck by a sudden thought, and she stared at her image in the mirror with horror.

"Why," she whispered, "he 's an Indian."

CHAPTER XVI

MARTHA soon found herself the apex of the eternal triangle; and while the position brought excitement and thrills, it brought even more worry and confusion. She soon forgot the strain of Indian blood in Frank, so much thinner than in herself, but she could not forget him for a minute. During the winter, he was able to call on her but seldom, and everything in her life was centered about his visits. If there was a rain- or snow-storm, she wept impotently because she knew that he could not get down from the mountains; if the sun shone, she was all smiles, singing while she worked, every nerve a-quiver for his coming. She smiled more and cried more in a month than she had in all her life before.

She did not let him kiss her until his fifth call, and then the kiss was brief. When his lips touched hers and his arms closed around her, she was so swept with emotion that she broke away from him in terror.

"Don't, Frank," she begged as he sought to embrace her again. "Please don't. I—I can't stand it."

He laughed and patted her cheek. "Ain't you

silly! Why, what 's a kiss?" Nevertheless, he saw that her fear was real and did not urge her further. "All right," he agreed. "I don't wantta scare you, but sometime, Martha, I'm goin' to kiss you till I jes' can't kiss you no more."

She more than half believed him, and she knew that if he was insistent her will-power would melt in his touch. All through the winter, she held him at arm's length, yearning for his kisses but fearing them as she feared death. The days between his visits were islands of safety in a sea of danger, but the islands were monotonously alike, and the sea was an enticing miracle. It lured her like the song of a siren, but she hesitated before the dangers that she knew lurked in its depths.

And then there was Wally, always faithful and adoring, waiting to give her everything that she could ask for. It was n't exactly the old problem of marrying for love or money, since Wally's money was really unimportant in her thoughts—and Frank had never asked her to marry him. She balanced the social position Wally could give her—that was important—his uprightness, his invariable kindness and thoughtfulness, and his deep devotion against Frank's wastefulness, his joyous willingness to let to-morrow take care of itself, his Indian blood, his open paganism, his undoubted immorality—and her longing to sink into his arms and lie there forever.

Beside Frank's wayward exuberance, Wally

seemed almost an old man, tepid and uninteresting. "He 's just an old muley cow," Martha told herself once, and then was promptly ashamed, but she was irked by his never-failing consideration and patience. "If he 'd just tell me once that I *had* to marry him, I 'd do it," she moaned miserably; "but he just keeps asking and asking and looking at me as if I had slapped him."

Both Aunt Ann and Mrs. Nichols offered her gratuitous advice. "Don' you have nuffin' to do with the Cross boy, honey," Ann had advised. "He sho' is funny. That boy jes' nacherly gets what he wants outta ev'rybody, but don' you let him get you. Chile, he cain't be depended on no mo' than a baby. You go right on an' marry up with Mistah Gardnah. Lissen to your Aunt Ann, honey; she knows."

Mrs. Nichols had said much the same thing, only more sharply.

"Martha, you 're treating Wally very badly," she began, shaking her finger at the embarrassed girl. "He 's told me that he 's asked you to marry him time and again, and why in the world you don't jump at him is beyond me. Believe me, any other girl in the valley would break her neck for the chance. He can give you everything in the wide world, and there is n't a better man living. I don't mean he 's good because he goes to church, either; there 's probably more A-One heathens, scamps, and hypocrites under that church roof Sunday mornings than you can find

anywhere else in the world; but Wally's honestly good."

"I know," Martha agreed; "he's fine, and he's been awfully good to me, but somehow I just can't make up my mind to get married."

"Nonsense! I suppose you are afraid to marry Wally because McLeod was a brute. You *are* a ninny, Martha. Why, Wally's a lamb."

"I know he is." And she had a fleeting wish that he would be less lamblike.

"Is that Frank Cross still calling on you?" Mrs. Nichols demanded. The flash in Martha's eyes told her the whole story, and she rushed into a denunciation before the girl could reply.

"So that's it!" she exclaimed. "Well, you get just as mad at me as you like, Martha McLeod, and you go right on snapping those black eyes at me as long as you want to, but I'm going to speak my mind no matter how mad you get. Frank Cross is a lovable boy, but he's the most irresponsible young harum-scarum I ever saw. He never has a nickel, and if he gets one by accident, he gambles it away. What in the world will happen to you if you marry him? It'll be Dan McLeod all over again. Oh, I don't mean he'll be brutal to you," she added hastily as Martha started to speak; "but he never can support you, and he'll lead you a dog's life. You'll never know where he is or what he's doing,

and he 'll be playing around with some other girl before you 're married a month. He 's just as ignorant as he can be, and he can't be depended on for a second." The severity of her face broke in a reminiscent smile as she confessed humorously, "I will admit, thought, that he 's got a smile that would seduce a nun."

"Frank has n't asked me to marry him," Martha replied, her voice almost sullen. "Besides, I know just as well as you do how silly it would be to marry him."

She knew well enough, but her desire for him did not dim as the winter dragged slowly to a close. Nor did her problem seem any easier to solve. With the coming of spring, however, she was forced to make a decision.

Wally had taken her to church as usual, and she had given him dinner at her house.

"Let 's go up in the hills this afternoon," she suggested. "I want to pick Easter lilies. I saw some boys with big bunches of them yesterday; lovely ones."

"All right," he agreed. "We 'll drive as far as the cemetery, and it won't be much of a walk from there up into the foot-hills."

The valley was in its full glory of springtime bloom, and Martha sat silently looking her fill during the ride to the cemetery. Wally was equally

silent, his face rather white and haggard, his eyes tired and dull. He flicked the horse's haunch idly with the whip and occasionally clucked softly.

The Easter lilies that Martha wanted were really dog-toothed violets, delicate star-shaped flowers that grew in the coolest depths of the cañons. She and Wally made their way slowly through manzanita and live-oak bushes, Wally carefully holding the stiff branches back so that Martha could pass by unscathed. The toyon-bushes had lost their brilliant red berries, but the madroña-trees were already spotted with berries that were less brilliant but even more red; the wild lilac shook its pale lavender blossoms in the light breeze; the buckeye candles were flossy brushes; bluebells and redbells trembled as they passed them by, while here and there wild pansies and violets spotted the pale green of the new grass with modest patches of warmer color. Overhead swayed giant oaks and maples, madroñas and pines, firs that whispered in their topmost branches, and alders that stretched their long, graceful arms protectingly over the little brooks that rushed chuckling down the ravines. Below them lay the valley, a lake of green surrounding ragged islands of golden poppies and blue lupine. Away to the south they could see Sanhedrim, the white snow at the tip of its cone melting softly into a pale blue that deepened into rich purples and dull greens at its base.

Martha and Wally broke their way through the brush down to the bottom of a cañon, and there they found the dog-toothed violets in abundance, hiding their creamy yellow loveliness amid tall stiff brakes and tender fronds of maidenhair fern. They soon picked a large bouquet of violets and ferns, as many as Martha could carry.

"Got all you want?" Wally asked as he handed her a few more violets.

Martha held the flowers against her bosom and buried her face in them, looking up at last to say softly, "Are n't they beautiful?"

He paid no attention to the flowers, but stared at her as if he were hypnotized, his eyes glowing slowly into a blue flame.

"Martha," he whispered, stepping close to her and placing his hands on her shoulders. "I can't wait any longer, Martha. I've waited month after month—and I can't stand it. Oh, I've got to have you; I've got to!" Suddenly his arms were around her, and his lips were pressed against hers. Slowly Martha's hands loosened on the flowers, and they fell lightly in a creamy shower—crushed.

At last he was no longer master of himself, and his passion won for him in five minutes what months of patient waiting had failed to win. Once more he asked Martha to marry him, and when once more she demurred he silenced her with kisses that demanded and did not ask. Finally she whispered her

consent, and his passion was lost in a flood of tenderness that brought tears to her eyes.

They walked down the hillside hand in hand, the flowers forgotten, the scratching bushes ignored. The shadows were long across the valley as they rode home, both of them shy and silent in their happiness.

Strangely, Wally did not demand an immediate marriage. His ardor had to bow before the demands of his work and his pride in Martha. A wedding-trip was an impossibility before autumn, and he said that he would not ask any woman to marry him until he could provide her with a decent house. So after considerable discussion regarding crops, haying, sheep-shearing, and house-building, they finally decided on the third Sunday in September for their wedding.

Wally never mentioned Frank Cross's visits, but Martha decided that she must play fair and tell Frank to keep away. Fortunately he did not call for weeks, having gone south with a drove of cattle; and when he finally appeared, Martha told him frankly that she was engaged to Wallace Gardner and that he must not come any more.

"Why not?" he demanded. "You ain't married, are yuh? And s'pose you were. What difference would that make? I can go on seein' yuh, can't I, even if you are wearin' a whale of a diamond. Let's see the thing, anyhow."

Martha held out her hand, and her fingers tingled when Frank touched them while examining the stone. It was a beautiful ring, and she had trembled with pride when Wally took off the wedding-ring, long since turned brassy, and slipped on his expensive gift.

"Well, it certainly is a dinger," Frank announced, dropping her hand and leaning back in his chair. "Wally sorta busted himself, did n't he?"

Martha smiled. "I guess not. But, honestly, Frank, you must n't come any more. It's not right." She hoped he would stay away, but somehow life looked very bleak without him; and she was both relieved and ashamed of her relief when he said that he was going to keep right on coming.

"Now, looky here, Martha," he protested; "you ain't talkin' sense; that's all. I ain't doin' you no harm, and if Wally says anything, I'll bust him one on the nose. Ain't yuh ever goin' to look at no one but Wally no more? Say, what's gettin' married, anyway; goin' to prison?"

"No, it's not that," she said slowly, wondering how she could explain the situation to him without revealing herself. "I don't think Wally would say anything. He's not the jealous kind, but I don't think it's right for me to go on seeing you when I'm engaged to him."

Frank smiled, and Martha's protests died in her answering smile. "Ain't you foolish," he teased,

chuckling. "How can I quit comin' to see yuh when I ain't had a real kiss outta yuh yet? And you know jes' as well as anything that I'm a-goin' to get that kiss." His eyes were twinkling roguishly, and his whole face was alight with his happy smile.

"Now, you're the one that's talking foolish! I can't kiss you now that I'm engaged. Don't you dare mention kissing again." She was alive once more with that curious ecstasy that Frank's presence always brought: her lips constantly trembled into smiles; her eyes glowed with soft, black fire; and her hands, usually so quiet, were restless with little gestures.

She was honest enough in her determination to put Frank out of her life. Wally's kisses had done more than melt her resistance; they had won her allegiance, too. She had no feeling of thrilling delight over her engagement to him, but she did have a feeling of restfulness and comfort that was very precious; it seemed to her that she had at last reached a safe port after a long and dangerous voyage.

She told Wally about Frank's call. "I told him that he would have to stay away," she said, "but he said that he would n't—that there was n't any harm in his coming. I like him, but I won't let him in if you say not to."

Wally, far too happy to worry and far too trustful to suspect Martha of disingenuousness, laughed

as he answered: "Oh, let him come if he wants to. Frank's not a bad sort, you know. I like him. Everybody does, I guess. He's wild, all right, but he never means any harm; just has n't grown up, that's all. Don't fight with him about me. I trust you too much, Martha, to worry about Frank Cross."

She took him at his word and let Frank call, partly because it seemed impossible to keep him away and partly because she wanted so much to see him.

May and June sped by, a calm two months in Martha's life. As a rule, she saw Wally only on Sundays, since he was much too busy to come to town during the week. He was up every morning before daybreak and never knew a minute of rest until bedtime at nine o'clock. Occasionally Frank spent an hour with her in the evening, but he, too, was busy and often out of town. Never once did he speak seriously to her of love, but he never failed to mention the kiss that he was going to get some day. Martha thought at times that he was only teasing her; at other times she thought his light manner hid a far more serious emotion. Frank never analyzed his reasons for calling on her. He wanted constantly to see her; so he called whenever he could. He thought no further.

Wally asked her to give up her work and insisted that there was no need any longer for her to do

anybody's sewing, not even her own; but a curious desire for independence, which she neither understood nor attempted to understand, made her deny his request.

"I would n't know what to do with myself, Wally," she objected, "if I was n't working. Besides, I'll need the money for my wedding-clothes, because I'm going to buy every inch of them myself. I'll tell you what I'll do: I promise not to sew a stitch for anybody but myself after the first of September. I'll begin making my own things then, and I swear that I won't sew for anybody else, not even Mrs. Nichols."

Wally planned to start the carpenters at work on the new house the first of September, too, figuring that it would be finished by the time they returned from their wedding-journey. They had agreed that they would buy the furniture and carpets in San Francisco. It was to be a wonderful house, the finest in the valley, with a bath-tub and running water.

CHAPTER XVII

WORD was brought to Martha late in July that Mrs. Nichols was seriously ill and that the doctor thought she had typhoid fever. For two weeks Martha nursed the sick woman night and day, but she nursed without hope, feeling sure from the first with dreadful pessimism that her friend would die.

When she was not delirious, Mrs. Nichols was equally sure. "I'm going to die, Martha," she said in her last few rational moments; "I know I am; and I've got something to say to you first."

Martha choked back her tears as best she could and said with false gaiety: "Don't talk that way or I'll give you some medicine. You're going to get well so fast that you won't know that you've been sick."

The dying woman smiled faintly. "Don't be silly, dear. I know what I know. Somehow I'm not sorry, either, but I am sorry for poor Lester. He's been so good to me!" Too worn with fever to talk or to live, she closed her eyes wearily.

At last her eyelids lifted slowly, and once more a brave smile trembled on her lips. "I've been so

happy, Martha!" she whispered. "I can afford to die."

Martha was frankly weeping. "Don't say that; don't say that, please," she sobbed. "I can't stand it."

"Don't cry, dear, and listen to me. I can't talk long, and there is so much that I want to say. I've wanted to say it for a long time, but I've never dared to." Her eyelids fluttered weakly, but she summoned all her little strength and continued: "Martha, look out for your Indian blood. If you don't, it will get you. You see, you're just a pagan."

Martha blinked back her tears in her astonishment. "A pagan?" she repeated. "Why, what do you mean?"

The sick woman began to talk with feverish rapidity, the words pouring out of her in a thick stream that eventually dwindled down to unconsciousness.

"Yes, a pagan. You've gone to church all your life, and you were brought up by a minister, but you're a pagan just the same. I've watched you for years, and I know that religion has never touched you. You never think about it, and you never talk about it. You just live. Listen, Martha. Wally's religious; he's a Christian, and he'll turn you into a squaw if you'll let him. He'll do everything in the world for you because he loves you and because he'll think that he ought to. Watch out or he'll turn you into a squaw. You'll get fat and lazy.

You've stayed young and beautiful because you've had to work hard. Work has made a white woman out of you. Don't let rest turn you into an Indian. Wally will want to make you a queen. Look out or you'll just be his woman."

Her eyes were burning almost wildly, and her thin cheeks were flushed with fever. She rushed on, the words tumbling over each other as if she had suddenly tilted her mind and in one reckless moment was spilling out all its final store. "You're a pagan, a pagan. You don't pray. You're a wonderful wild creature pretending to be civilized. You're going to be a big fat squaw dressed in red silk. You'll squash Wally—a big fat squaw with a lot of babies. Look out, Martha! Stay white! Love Wally, work for him, slave for him, never quit slaving, and he'll worship you. I've loved you, Martha, because you were proud and wild and free, but I'm afraid for you. You can't afford to lose me, dear, and I'm dying. Yes, Martha, I'm dying."

Martha sat by the bed, staring in horrid fascination as the sick woman poured out her terrifying prophecy, the words cutting and burning like hot knives.

Mrs. Nichols began to speak more slowly, her voice softening into a bubbling whisper, her eyes gradually dulling into blankness. "I'm dying. I'm going to find out what it's all about." Suddenly her eyes blazed; her voice grew triumphantly strong.

"Martha, Martha, I'm going to find out God's secret!" Then she mumbled over and over again as the light in her eyes slowly guttered out, "God's secret, God's secret, God's . . ."

She never regained consciousness, and in the few hours that were left before she died Martha sat by the bed with Lester Nichols and watched the doctor make futile efforts to repel the fever. She neither felt nor thought; she merely sat and waited for death to finish its work, and when the doctor finally said that the work was done, she rose quietly and passed out of the room, leaving Mr. Nichols alone with his dead.

She had not wept when word came that Mrs. Armstrong had died, and she did not weep over the death of Mrs. Nichols. It did not bring heart-breaking sorrow to her; but it brought a blank that was much worse, a human void that could not be filled, an open hole in her soul that would yawn bleakly forever. She knew that she had lost her only friend. Two lovers were left, but no friends, and the lovers brought terror as well as ecstasy; the friend had brought solace.

Mr. Nichols asked that she sing at the funeral. "Nancy would wish it," he said, "and I do, too. I've asked the minister just to offer a prayer, but I want you to sing. Will you?"

"Of course. I'll sing 'Nearer, My God, to Thee.'"

She was afraid at first that she would cry and that her voice would fail her, but when she faced the congregation, she was quite calm. No sorrow choked her throat, and no tears dimmed her voice. She thought of Nancy Nichols's triumphant cry that she was going to learn God's secret, and then she sang the old hymn as if it were a battle-song, a pæan of victory. That hideous black coffin before her with its cheap German silver handles and the few poor flowers strewn over it never housed the brave spirit of her friend.

When at the request of the minister the members of the congregation filed slowly by the coffin to "take one last look at the dear departed," she sat calmly in her place watching the gruesome ceremony with indifferent eyes. She rode to the cemetery with Wally in his buggy, her black gloved hands resting calmly in her lap, her eyes dry, her lips steady.

"It's a big funeral," Wally observed softly.

"Yes." And there was that in her voice that drove him into silence.

There was no hearse in Round Valley, and the coffin, covered with an old gray blanket, was carried in a rattly buckboard which was drawn by a couple of dirty farm-horses. Following it came the buggies, and after them the carts, two-wheeled vehicles built like clumsy racing-sulkies; and bringing up the procession were a couple of dozen horse-back riders trying vainly to hold their half-broken

mounts down to a decorous pace. On the picket-fences the village children perched, happily counting the mourners, listing carefully the buggies, carts, and riders, and comparing the numbers with those of the last funeral.

The cemetery was in the west of the valley close to the mountains, and the funeral procession had to cross the untilled meadows which were known as the plains. There the farmers hauled the carcasses of their dead animals, and Martha shivered as she passed skeletons of cows and horses, the white bones glaring in the dazzling sunlight. There were always buzzards circling over the valley, and, hideous in their suggestion, they sailed in a black multitude above the procession.

The ceremony at the grave was fortunately brief. Women who had criticized Nancy Nichols for years sobbed as the minister prayed, and their sobs rose to wailing cries when he dropped a handful of earth on the coffin and said with professional lugubriousness, "Dust unto dust."

Tears were hastily dried, however, as the mourners turned from the grave. By the time the women had reached their buggies, they had ceased sniffing and had straightened their hats. Then the real fun of the funeral began; the mourners had a free-for-all race back to Covelo. The horseback riders ran their mounts the three miles, whooping and hallooing; and the others followed, whipping their horses

into a reckless trot, shouting to each other, roaring with glee when they drew ahead of a competitor. Once in town, the men rushed to a saloon to get the dust out of their throats; the women congregated in various parlors and discussed the funeral from the minister's prayer to the handles on the coffin. The consensus of opinion was that it had been a very nice funeral.

Martha sought no such gathering. She sent even Wally away, telling him that she wanted to be alone. She spoke the truth, but she did not want to be alone to mourn, as he thought, but to think—to think about the friend that she had lost and the words that her friend had spoken. A pagan? She wondered. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. Nichols had struck terror into Martha's soul, and she found herself drawing away from Wally as if he were something loathsome. Once she had thought calmly, she knew that religion meant nothing to her. She had been shocked when Dan had refused to ask a blessing at the table or to let her ask one, but after a week she had forgotten the sacred custom of a lifetime. He had laughed when she knelt down to pray before going to bed; and, ashamed of his laughter, she had not prayed, thinking that she would hold her communion with God in private; but praying, too, had been a custom, a part of going to bed just as braiding her hair was, and when she once ceased to pray at night she ceased entirely to pray. Wally was religious, and Mrs. Nichols had said that his religion would make him too kind to her; it would make him care for her so tenderly that she would degenerate into a squaw. Christianity suddenly became a terrible thing, a subtle monster that destroyed one with kindness.

She wanted to break her engagement and did not dare. The whole valley, she knew, would talk as it had never talked before, and there was n't a single valid reason that she could give Wally for hurting

and humiliating him. The qualities in him that she had cherished became fearful, but those same qualities made it impossible for her to seek release.

By the last week in August she had made up her mind to go through with the marriage, at last assuring herself that her fears were groundless and that she was placing absurd emphasis on the feverish statements of a dying woman. She saw no reason why Wally's kindness and love should soften her into a squaw.

No sooner, however, had she reached a decision than she had to make it all over again. One Monday night Frank called for the first time in a month, and she was so delighted to see him that she smiled with genuine happiness for the first time since Mrs. Nichols's death.

"Come in!" she cried. "What a stranger you are! Why, I have n't seen you for weeks."

"I went over to the Coast with some cattle," he explained, sailing his hat across the room to the table, "and jes' as soon as I got back I had to go to Ukiah with some more. I 'm goin' to be in town a week, though."

"A week?"

"Yep! There ain't much doin' up on the ranch jes' now, and I told Cal Simms that I thought I was in a bad way, pneumony or somethin'. Anyway, I needed a rest bad, a hull week of it; so Cal said all right I could come. Ain't you glad, Martha?"

He smiled at her mischievously. "You oughtta be glad, 'cause I 'm comin' to see yuh every afternoon and twice every evenin'."

Martha laughed. "Don't be silly. You are the craziest boy I ever knew." She picked up a dress she was making and began to stitch busily. She always felt the need to sew when Frank called. The work somehow gave her control and poise. "Tell me about that feud that 's going on. I 've heard that you people up on Simms's ranch have been fighting with Keene's men again."

"Oh, not really fightin'," he replied with a grin. "Not regular fightin', anyway. One of the boys had a little set-to with Pomo Pete. Nothin' come of it, though."

"Pomo Pete! Why, I thought he 'd been shot months ago and was n't expected to get well."

"Course he got well. You could n't kill Pete with no regular gun. It 'd take an awful big cannon. Sure, he 's well, and he 's certainly buckerooin' round them mountains. He ain't sure which one of us boys winged him; so he's gunnin' for the lot of us. Pete 's goin' to get hurt some time if he don't look out." And Martha, glancing up from her work, was startled by the sudden gleam in his eyes.

He chattered for a couple of hours, telling her about his experiences since he had seen her last, interrupting himself occasionally to chaff her about her coming marriage, bragging boyishly about his ex-

ploits at the gaming-table, and entertaining her so completely that she was loath to have him go when he said that he must. She did not protest, however, when she rose to see him to the door. She always hated to have Frank leave, but she always felt safer after he had.

"When you goin' to get married?" he asked as he reached for his hat.

"Oh, in about a month."

"Gosh, as soon as that? I'll have to get busy, won't I?" He ran his hand through his curly black hair and looked at her with twinkling eyes.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, knowing perfectly well what he meant but hungry to hear him say it.

"Gettin' that kiss; that's what I mean. Say, I think this must be jes' the night for that kiss." Back sailed his hat on the table as he advanced slowly toward her, his face alight with a teasing smile. "Now you stand right still, Martha; don't you go backin' away like that. There!" he exclaimed as she reached the wall and he placed his hands on her shoulders. "There you are! Now, you don't do nothin', Martha, but jes' stand quiet and I'll do all the work. Mind, you don't have to do nothin'."

She looked at him, her eyes wide and startled, her whole body tense and tingling under his touch. "Don't Frank," she whispered. "Please don't."

"Don't!" He threw back his head and laughed joyously. "Don't! Don't be foolish; that 's what. Course I 'm goin' to kiss yuh." His face drew closer to hers, and he whispered softly, "I'm goin' to kiss yuh and kiss yuh and kiss yuh—like this." Slowly he forced his arms between her and the wall; slowly he drew her to him, pressing back her protesting hands with his chest; slowly he bent and sought her lips with his own. She tried to repel him, to tell him to leave her alone, but she was hypnotized into silence by the light in his eyes, and her strength died in the wonder of his touch.

At first his kiss was meaningless to her, so lost was she in fear, but as his arms drew tighter and his lips pressed more firmly against her own, she was swept by an ecstasy that drove out fear. She thought of nothing; she knew nothing. As if of their own volition, her arms crept around his neck; then slowly, flutteringly, her hands sought the back of his head. Suddenly they pressed tensely on his black curls, and she drew his head down until his lips merged with hers into a kiss that was a flame.

Everything was forgotten in that kiss, everything but the kiss itself and the rapture of it. Taken aback, Frank loosened his arms slightly. He had n't expected . . . But as his arms loosened, Martha tightened hers hysterically. "God!" he whispered, "God!" Then, all scruples burned away by her kiss, he surrendered to his passion.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR the remainder of the week Martha lived in Frank's arms, so lost in her passion for him that the rest of the world ceased to exist. She had a feeling that Aunt Ann knew what was going on, but she did not care; nothing mattered; nothing but Frank's kisses, his strong embrace, his whispered words of love. He told her how sweet she was, the most wonderful girl that he had ever known, the dearest, the loveliest; and she drank in his words like a famished woman, drank until she was drunk with torturing happiness.

Saturday night he told her that he had to go back to the ranch. "I promised Cal that I'd be back to-night," he said ruefully, "and I've gotta keep my word to him, 'cause he's treated me awful white."

Martha twisted her arms around his neck and clung to him hysterically. "Oh, my dear, my dear!" she whispered with tears in her voice, "I can't bear to have you go; I just can't. Don't leave me, Frank. Please don't leave me."

"I don't want to, honey girl, but I've gotta. I gave my word to Cal. I'll come back, though. You

bet I will. There ain't no one on earth like you, sweetheart, and I love yuh better than everybody else on earth put together. I'll come back to yuh jes' as soon as I can get away." He bent his head and kissed her black hair. "Um, you're sweet. I'm crazy about yuh, Martha honey."

She leaned her cheek in the hollow of his shoulder and wept. She felt that if he left, her life would be cut out of her body and that all that would remain would be an empty shell, an aching, useless thing.

"Don't cry," Frank begged. "It jes' kills me to see you cry. I'll be back soon, Martha. Quit cryin', sweetheart, and kiss me good-by. There, there, be a good girl and smile for me."

She dried her eyes on the red bandana handkerchief around his neck and attempted a feeble smile. "If you don't get back in a few days, I'll die of lonesomeness," she said, sniffing woefully. "Promise me you'll be here soon."

"Of course, I'll be here soon. I don't know how I'm goin' to keep away at all. Kiss me, honey girl."

She kissed him and held back her tears until he was gone, but the instant the door closed she threw herself on the sofa and sobbed herself asleep. An hour later she woke up cold and shivering. Wearily she undressed and went to her lonely bed. It was suddenly so wide and empty. "Frank, Frank dear-

est," she whispered; and once more she sobbed, so deeply was she in love, so utterly, utterly alone.

The next morning she was startled by a knock on her door, and when she opened it and saw Wally standing before her, she stared at him in astonishment as if she were looking at a stranger.

"Why, Martha," he exclaimed, "you have n't dressed for church. Are n't you going?"

Church! Why, it was Sunday! She had forgotten the day of the week, forgotten that Wally always called to take her to church, forgotten, indeed, that he even existed.

"No," she replied slowly, trying to gather the fragments of her mind into coherent speech; "no, I'm not going to-day." She made no move to open the screen-door that separated them; and Wally was so surprised by her statement, her manner, and her appearance that he stood still and looked at her, his blue eyes worried and confused. He had never seen Martha when she was n't carefully and trimly dressed, but this morning she was obviously uncorseted, her dress was ugly with wrinkles and creases, and her hair had evidently not been combed. The long black braids were twisted into a careless, disorderly knot on the top of her head.

"What's the matter?" he asked solicitously. "Are n't you well, Martha? You look awfully pale."

"No," she responded dully; "no, I'm not very

well. I had a bad night. Don't come in, Wally," she added hastily as he put his hand on the door-latch; "I want to be alone."

"Are n't you going to let me see you at all to-day? Why, Martha dear, I've got to be with you if you're sick. I won't go to church, either; I'll stay with you."

When she answered him, her words fell from her lips as if they were gray bits of lead, dull and lifeless words that dropped dead as she spoke them. "No, you go to church. I'm all right."

"No, you are n't all right; you're sick; anybody can see that. I'll get Dr. Tucker."

"I don't want Dr. Tucker. I'm not sick that way."

"Oh, Martha, what is the matter with you?" Wally was terrified by her untidy appearance and sluggish speech. "I'm so worried I don't know what to do. Something's wrong. Please let me in and tell me."

"Don't come in," she said sharply, her eyes lighting for an instant; then they went dead again as she added more quietly: "I want to be alone. But come this afternoon if you want to. Come about two. I've got to tell you something."

"Can't I come before two?" He leaned against the door and peered eagerly through its screening. "Please let me come before then. I can't wait that long, I'm so worried."

"All right; come at one, then. Good-by."

Wally's confusion and distress were in his face as he murmured good-by and turned away. He could not form the slightest idea of what was wrong; but, unimaginative though he was, he had a premonition that a black cloud had sailed over his life, a cloud so dense that he could see no light through it and so black that it threatened him like a spirit of evil. He did not go to church but wandered to the foot-hills to wait miserably until one o'clock.

Shaken out of her morning lethargy by Wally's call, Martha lighted a fire in the kitchen stove, put a pot of coffee on to boil, and then went out to the back porch. She filled an agate basin with cold water from the well and washed her face until her brain began to clear. After she had drunk a couple of cups of coffee, she was able to think coherently.

Her emotion over Frank's departure, she reasoned, was absurd. He would be back in a few days, and even after they were married she would n't be able to have him with her every hour of the day. She told herself that she was acting like a silly girl, that she ought to be so happy because he loved her that nothing else could matter; and so successful was her logic that she was soon actually humming as she went about the house and proceeded to put it to rights. It needed her ministrations badly, since she had given it no care in the week that Frank had been with her.

Once the house was presentable, she heated some water and took a bath. A passing glimpse of herself in a mirror had shocked her. "I won't feel like a human being," she thought, "until I get washed all over and put on some clean clothes."

Not once did she think of Wally until she sat down to a light lunch. Then suddenly the fact that he was going to call at one o'clock flashed into her mind. Instantly her gaiety was destroyed in the recognition of her problem. What could she say to him? What would he say when she told him that she could n't marry him? And he had planned to start building the house in a few days, too. . . . It was going to be hard, awfully hard. She felt sorry for Wally, but her sorrow was lightened by a feeling of approaching freedom that compensated for everything. She shivered when she thought how close she had come to the wedding, but she thanked God that Frank had revealed his love for her in time. Marriage with Wally had always seemed to her like life-long confinement in a beautiful, smothering prison; with Frank it seemed like—it seemed far too wonderful for any word to suggest. And she had almost lost that wonder. "Why in the world did n't he tell me before?" she asked herself, and then forgot the question in the joy that he had told her at last.

Promptly at one Wally was at the door, and he looked as haggard and woebegone as Martha had in the morning. In his few hours alone he had tried

vainly to solve the riddle, and his impotent thinking had tortured him into terror. When Martha answered his knock and stood before him looking as fresh and healthy as he had ever seen her, his confusion and his fear were doubled. Her hair was once more in neat, gleaming coils on the top of her head, her body was firmly corseted, and her pink dress with its white bertha and ruffles was beautifully ironed. It was impossible to believe that this bright, beautiful creature was the drab slattern of the morning.

"Do you feel better, Martha?" he asked as she held open the screen-door and he walked into the parlor. "You look lots better." He was n't relieved by the improvement in her appearance; he was startled and frightened by it. It was too sudden, too dramatic, for him to understand.

"Yes," she replied quietly, "I'm much better. I'm all right now. You look tired, though."

Wally dropped wearily into a chair. "I am tired. I've nearly worried myself sick. Tell me what's the matter, Martha. Don't keep me waiting."

She sat down and clasped her hands thoughtfully. It was hard to tell him, but she had to do it—and the sooner the better.

"I'm awfully sorry, Wally," she said softly, "but I've got to give this back to you." She drew off her engagement-ring and held it out to him. He stared at her blankly and made no move to take the ring.

"Why, what's the matter?" he mumbled. The question was automatic; he did n't know that he had asked it. Her quiet statement seemed to sweep his mind empty, to leave it completely without understanding.

"Take it, please." When he remained rigidly motionless, she placed the ring on the table and waited. Gradually understanding erased the blank look from Wally's eyes.

"You mean," he said slowly, "you mean you won't marry me?"

"I can't, Wally. I'm awfully sorry about it; honest, I am."

"Why—why, what's the matter? What have I done?" He leaned forward, pathetically confused and unhappy, peering at her as if he could find in her eyes the answer to the riddle. He was still dazed, still bewildered, but gradually her meaning was penetrating into his consciousness.

"You have n't done anything, Wally. Oh, it's awfully hard to tell you, awfully hard! You've been wonderful to me, just wonderful, and I know that you are going to hate me. I can't help it, though, Wally; I just can't. You know how I held you off and held you off because I was n't sure. I did n't know what was the matter. I—"

"What is it? What is it, Martha?" he interrupted, holding his hand pleadingly toward her. "What's wrong, dear? Tell me."

"Oh, Wally, don't take it so hard!" she cried, her voice breaking with pity. "Nothing was wrong with you then; nothing is now. I just did n't love you; that 's all; and I did n't know it. I liked you so much and admired you so much that I finally thought I loved you, but I never did; and I just can't marry you."

He actually smiled in his relief. He had seen her like this before; he had seen her hesitating and frightened for months, but he had lifted her out of her fear, and he could again.

"Yes, you do! You said for months that you did n't love me, and then you found out that you did. Why, Martha, I 'll make you so happy after we 're married that you 'll just have to love me. I love you so much that you 'll have to love me back. You won't be able to help it." Martha lifted her hand to stem his excitement, but he rushed on unheeding. "I 'll give you everything in the world. Oh, Martha, nobody 'll ever be as good to you as I will. I 'll slave myself to death for you."

"Wait, Wally! Wait!" The imperative ring in her voice silenced him. "I know you will, and that 's one reason why I can't marry you. Listen. Just before she died, Mrs. Nichols warned me about that very thing. She said that you would be so good to me that you would turn me into a big fat squaw; she said that you would ruin me with kindness. You would, too. I don't dare marry you, Wally." She

was almost ashamed of her deceit, but she was instinctively sparring for time, afraid to tell the true reason.

He lay back in his chair and laughed. "Are n't you foolish. As if anybody could turn *you* into a squaw. Did Mrs. Nichols think you 'd be happier if I beat you? Don't be silly like that, Martha." He picked up the ring and held it out to her. "Here, put it back on and make me happy again. You told me that you loved this ring because I gave it to you. Put it back on, Martha dear, and forget all this foolishness."

She knew at last that she would have to tell him about Frank. "Put it in your pocket, Wally," she said gently; "I can't wear it. You see—there's another man."

Wally seemed to freeze in his position, his arm held rigidly toward her; and then he slowly crumpled in the chair, beaten.

"Another man?" he whispered.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but I can't help loving him; I can't. I—I guess I feel about Frank the way you feel about me."

"Frank? Frank Cross?"

"Yes, it's Frank Cross. I tried and tried to give him up for you, Wally, but I could n't."

Frank's name seemed to put new life into Wally. He sat up again and spoke rapidly and with assurance.

"Why, Martha," he exclaimed, "you can't marry Frank Cross. He's just a vaquero, and he can't even support you."

Her head went up proudly. "I can support myself. I have for a long time."

But Wally was not to be put aside. "Yes, you have, and it's about time you stopped. You married one vaquero, and look at the life he led you. Frank's no brute like Dan McLeod, but he's just as wasteful and wild. Why, Martha, he's ignorant, as ignorant as an Indian, more ignorant than some of them. You can't marry a man like that. He's the one that will make a squaw out of you. I won't."

Martha sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing with anger, her face drawn and ashen. "Don't you dare talk that way about Frank! Don't you dare!" She snatched his hat from the table and threw it in his lap. "Here, take this and get out of here."

The hat fell to the floor as Wally stood up and moved pacifyingly toward her. "Why, what's the matter?" he asked, bewildered. "I have n't said anything about Frank that is n't true. He'll lead you a dog's life; you know he will. You just think you love him. He's good-looking and likable, but he is n't worth a hoot." As she stared fiercely at him, a slow dull anger crept into his brain and killed his usual common sense. "He's as common as dirt," he added sharply, his voice acid with contempt.

Martha trembled in her fury. "I 'll kill you if you say another word about him," she whispered, curving her fingers into angry claws. "I 'll kill you, you—you—"

Wally's anger mounted with hers until it took complete possession of him. Disappointment and pain had goaded him into a rage that robbed him of reason. He was not frightened by the black blaze in her eyes, by her threatening words, or her raised hands. His own eyes were blue fire, and his face was ghastly beneath its tan. He stepped close to her, and when he spoke his voice cracked like a whip.

"Be quiet! Listen to me! Frank don't want to marry you—not him! He wants to sleep with you; that's what he wants to do; and when he's done that he 'll leave you for some other woman."

"Is that so?" She laughed sneeringly. "Is that so? Well, you listen to me, Mister Know-it-all. Well, he's already slept with me. Do you hear that? He slept with me every night last week, and he still loves me. What do you think of that?" She leaned forward and grimaced derisively in his face, so beside herself with fury that she did not reckon the cost of her words.

"What! What! You—you!" Wally lifted his clenched fist; then slowly he let it fall to his side.

He picked up his hat and walked to the door. He paused an instant before leaving and said softly:

"So you 're that kind. I might have known it."

And Martha knew that he meant that she was a half-breed.

CHAPTER XX

MARTHA was not ashamed of her confession to Wally; nor did it worry her. She knew that her secret was safe with him forever, and she was so proud of Frank's love that she did not care if the world knew about it. Her feeling about her amour was utterly contradictory; instinctively she felt that happiness lay in concealment, and therefore she was glad that Wally could be trusted not to tell any one what he had learned, but she had a wild desire at the same time to shout her joy from the housetops, to parade the village with Frank and tell every one she met that here was her lover.

Her confession had served a purpose, too, that nothing else could have accomplished: it had slain Wally's love with one cruel stroke. She knew that the one thing that he could not forgive in a woman was unchastity and that he would avoid her in the future as if she were something loathsome. There was nothing, she felt, for offense in his parting remark; there was no intentional insult in it. He had merely expressed a point of view which she understood perfectly. She supposed that she would have felt the same way.

With merciless speed she put Wally out of her

mind and centered all of her thoughts on Frank. He was all that mattered. Wally was a memory, one that was pleasant enough but of no great importance. He was a good man, and she wished him well. Beyond that careless thought he ceased to exist for her; and since he rarely came to the village on week-days and since she never again went to church on Sundays, he passed out of her life as completely as if she had traveled a thousand miles away.

She told her various employers that she was not going to do any more sewing for them and set to work on her trousseau. Wally's engagement to her had brought her a period of unprecedented prosperity, and she was able to satisfy her vanity to the full. She bought broadcloth for a suit, silks and satins for evening-gowns, sheer linens for her lingerie, the best gingham for her house-dresses. She was recklessly and absurdly extravagant, knowing full well that the evening-gowns were practically useless to her and that she would not wear the suit a dozen times; but she wanted to dress her beauty for Frank, to glorify it until he fell at her feet in abject admiration. She knew, too, that her shopping was premature, since there was n't a chance that Frank would be able to marry her before late autumn and possibly not before winter. He would not be even moderately free from his duties on the ranch before then.

Nevertheless, the Monday after her break with Wally, she went to Kerr's store and bought until she was satiated. It would take her a long time to make the clothes, she reasoned, and she might as well buy all the materials at once. Mr. Kerr, thinking naturally that she was preparing for her marriage with Wallace Gardner, took her extravagance for granted and showed her the best that his store afforded; and she took what she wanted, never hesitating, no matter what the price.

Frank did not come again until Thursday afternoon, and he found her on the back porch washing her hair. She raised her head from the big white bowl when she heard his step.

"Oh, Frank!" she exclaimed, holding the great mat of soapy hair on top of her head. "I'm so glad to see you! Don't come near me!" she cried as he bounded up the steps and rushed to her. "You 'll get both of us sopping wet if you touch me. Sit down on that old chair there until I get my hair rinsed. No, don't sit down, either. Go into the kitchen and get me another pail of hot water off the stove." She smiled happily at him, holding her head down awkwardly to keep the soapy water out of her eyes.

"Durn it!" Frank exclaimed as he picked up the pail. "What do yuh have to be washin' your hair for? Now I 'll have to wait to kiss yuh. Women are the durndest critters, ain't they?" He smiled

teasingly and slapped her on the back; then he departed for the kitchen, returning promptly with the warm water.

When Martha's hair was finally free of soap, she wrapped a towel around her head like a turban and permitted Frank to lead her into the house so that he might have his kiss.

"I've got to go out in the yard and dry my hair," she explained when he finally released her. "There's so much of it that I have to sit in the sun to get it dry. Come out in the yard with me."

"All right," he agreed grudgingly, "though I don't like it outside. You won't let me kiss yuh." He pointed to the guitar. "Take that thing along, won't yuh, and sing to me. I sure like to hear you sing."

Frank's desires were commands to her; so she picked up the guitar and slipped its cord around her neck. Frank carried a chair into the yard and placed it in the shade of a tree on the west side of the house.

"No, not there, foolish," Martha scolded merrily; "not in the shade. I've got to bake here in the sun if my hair is ever going to get dry. You can sit there in the shade, old lazybones." She took the chair from him, placed it in the strong sunlight, let down her hair, and then clutched the ends of it frantically.

"Oh, Frank, you made me forget," she cried.

"Run into the house and get me another towel. I've got to have one on the ground."

"What's the matter with the one you've got?" he demanded.

"That's to go around my shoulders. Hurry up, please; and get my comb, too. I forgot it."

When Frank returned with the towel and comb, she shook her hair out over her shoulders and let it fall in its damp masses to the towel on the ground. He sprawled comfortably under the walnut-tree and regarded her with genuine awe.

"Gosh, what a lot of hair you've got! I've never seen nothin' like it. I noticed it one night. It hangs plumb down to your knees."

Martha put her hand to the nape of her neck and lifted the heavy mass of wet hair. "It looks like a horse's tail right now," she said ruefully. "Yes, I've got a lot of hair, but it's an awful lot of trouble, too." She dried her hand on the towel about her neck and then slipped her fingers idly over the guitar-strings. "What do you want me to sing? 'La Paloma'?"

"What's 'La Paloma'? It sounds like a cigar. That reminds me: I've gotta have a smoke." He pulled the yellow papers and sack of tobacco out of his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette with incredible speed.

"It's a song," she replied, laughing. "Wait a

minute, though, until I comb my hair out. It 'll dry faster."

The moment stretched into many minutes while she combed the tangles out of her hair. It was a long, slow job, and the outer strands, dried by the sun and light wind, were already fluffing softly away from her shoulders by the time she had finished her combing.

"There now," she said at last. "It 'll dry without any snarls, and it 'll dry twice as fast, too. Look, lots of it is dry already." She ran her fingers lingeringly through her gleaming black tresses.

"Never mind your hair, sweetness," Frank observed lazily as he rolled a second cigarette. "You were goin' to sing that La Somethin' thing. What is it, anyhow?"

"It 's the song I 'm going to sing at the social to-morrow night."

"What social?" He slipped his back slowly down the trunk of the tree until he was lying prone. "I did n't know there was goin' to be a social."

"Of course, there is. The Dorcas Aid is giving one, and they 've asked me to sing. This 'La Paloma' is a Spanish song, I think; maybe Mexican. Mrs. Nichols had it in a book that she gave me a long time ago. I 'm going to sing it, and I 'm going to be fixed up all Spanish. Aunt Ann has a big Spanish shawl somebody gave her once, and she 's

going to let me wear it. It's the biggest thing I ever saw. It's orange and black and red—gorgeous! And you wrap it all around you just like a dress. I'm going to wear my hair in a great big puff with a yellow tortoise-shell comb behind it. It's the biggest comb I ever saw. I don't know how Mr. Kerr ever happened to have it in his store."

Frank rolled his head sideways to grin at her. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, but it sounds awful good. Let's hear the song."

"All right. Wait until I tune the guitar."

Neither of them noticed two men who had paused outside the fence to look at her. Their clothes stamped them at once as from the city, as did the whiteness of their hands and faces.

"Look, Phil," one of them said suddenly. "Look at that woman. Did you ever see anything like her?" The speaker was a little fat man with bright brown eyes and pendulous jowls.

"My God!" exclaimed the other, who was considerably taller and younger than his companion. "She's marvelous, Jim. Here, get behind this tree so she can't see us. She's going to sing, I think."

They slipped quickly behind an oak-tree and waited eagerly. When the first notes of "La Paloma" reached them, they looked at each other in astonishment, so rich was the voice, so clear and fresh. Martha was glowing with love, and her voice was alive with it. She was wonderful as she

sat there in the sparkling sunlight, her black hair swept about her shoulders by the breeze, her cheeks pink with warmth and happiness, her Turkey-red dress open at the neck and revealing the creamy smoothness of her round throat. The towel on her shoulders was a splash of white between the black sheen of her hair and the dull red of her dress; the dry grass at her feet was pale gold; and flickering across the black and white, the red and gold, were dainty leaf-shadows. A beautiful woman, her beauty ripened to its full by love, her great black eyes facing easily the crystal sunlight, her fingers sweeping nimbly across the strings of the guitar: light, glamour, beauty—a picture for Sorolla!

“Lord God in heaven!” breathed the fat man as she sang the last notes and turned to smile tenderly at Frank. “Did you ever see or hear anything like that? Phil, I’ve got to have her. She’s worth a thousand a week to me.”

“Hell, yes! She’s worth twice that in New York. Say, if we stay here, she’ll see us. Let’s go down town and find out about her.”

The two men turned and hurried through the heavy dust down to the main street of the village; at least, it was the lane that had most of the saloons, the town well, and both of the stores. They mounted the steps of Kerr’s store and, ignoring the squaws squatted on the porch, hurried inside, making their way to the rear between plows, boxes of canned

stuffs, piles of suits and calico shirts, and golden oak furniture. The proprietor was handing a young Indian his change.

As soon as the Indian had gone, they introduced themselves. "I am James Cleary," said the small man, "and this is Mr. Philip Butler."

"Drummers?" asked Mr. Kerr pleasantly as he shook hands with the men in turn and assured them that he was pleased to meet them.

"No," said Butler. "I'm a lawyer, and Mr. Cleary is a theatrical manager."

"Well, that's funny; I was sure you must be drummers from your clothes. The drummers come about this time with their winter goods. Well, what can I do for you? Want to buy somethin'?" Kerr ran his stubby fingers through his curly gray hair and waited, and while waiting he satisfied an ever-present urge. He reached to the shelf behind him, picked up a square of chewing-tobacco, cut off a slice with his knife, put the dainty in his mouth, and held out the plug hospitably to each of his visitors. When they declined the treat with a negative shake of their heads, he restored the tobacco to the shelf and chewed vigorously.

"I just now saw a girl that interested me," began Cleary. "But maybe I'd better explain first that we're here for pleasure, not business. We've come up here deer-hunting, and I understand that there is

still some good fishing if you go far enough up into the mountains."

"Sure, it 's still good," Kerr observed thickly, "if you go far enough away. Better try Hull Crick."

"That 's where we thought of going. They told us in the hotel that they knew a half-breed that would take us up there and cook for us. Well, never mind that; what I want now is to find out about that girl. We were taking a walk and passed her house. She lives a hundred yards or so from here right next to what looks like a flour-mill. Mr. Butler and I were walking by and heard her singing. She 's very beautiful with black eyes and extraordinarily long black hair. She 's got a fine voice, too. Looks as if she might be Spanish. Do you know who she is?"

"That must be Martha McLeod. But she ain't Spanish."

"No! What is she then?"

"A half-breed Injun."

"Really!" Cleary exclaimed. "Well, I never would have guessed it. She looks very superior."

Kerr turned his head and spat. Then he leaned comfortably against the counter and explained. "She is superior," he said decidedly. "She was brought up by a minister, and she 's got a heap more eddication than most folks up this way. A few years back she married a no-count vaquero named

Dan McLeod. I guess she sent him packin'. Anyway, he got out of the valley and ain't been seen or heard of since. Now she's engaged to Wally Gardner, one of the richest men round here; fine young feller, too."

"Engaged!" cried Cleary. "That's hell. I suppose the young fellow with her was Gardner; tall, dark young chap, very good-looking. I thought he was a vaquero."

"No; that was n't Wally; that was Frank Cross. He's always hangin' round her, but I guess they're just friends, though there are folks round here as says otherwise. Anyhow, she's goin' to marry Wally in about a month. Came in here the other day and bought her clothes, and I will say that she certainly spread herself. Nothin' was too good for her."

"Is this Wally Gardner a half-breed, too?" Butler asked.

"Hell, no! He's as white as you are—whiter."

"But I did n't know that white men ever really married Indians."

Kerr laughed. "Say, if you want to get into trouble, just hint to Martha McLeod that she's got any Injun blood in her. She'll tear your eyes out. She never goes near an Injun, never looks at 'em. She pretends to be white."

Cleary had been depressedly silent ever since Kerr had said that Martha was engaged to be married,

but he suddenly became alert, his brown eyes alive with interest.

"Do the white people accept her?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, they do now that she's engaged to Wally. They've got to; too many of 'em owe Wally money. But they ain't crazy about her—I'll tell you that—and Martha's had a pretty tough time of it. She sews for a livin', and I've seen the day when she hardly knew where her next meal was comin' from. I know because I keep her money for her."

"Um, I see," said Cleary thoughtfully. "When do you suppose I could have a talk with her alone?"

"Lord, man, I don't know. Not now, though; that's sure if Frank Cross is there. He'll hang around her until he has to go back to the ranch. Too bad he's with her so much. Folks are talkin'. Wally don't seem to mind, though. He told me a week or so ago that Frank called on her with his permission. Looks queer to me just the same," he concluded significantly as he turned again and spat liberally behind the counter.

"Well, I want to see her some time," Cleary said positively, "and we planned to leave Saturday morning."

"I know!" Kerr exclaimed, slapping the counter triumphantly. "She's goin' to sing at the Dorcas Aid social to-morrow night at White's Hall. She's goin' to be fixed up Spanish. I know because she

come in here yesterday to buy a tortoise-shell comb, and she told me all about it. Just happened that I had one, too. I'd had it here all of twenty years."

"That's fine, fine!" Cleary rubbed his hands together delightedly. "We'll get a fine idea of her stage presence," he said to Butler, "and get a chance to talk to her at the same time." He turned to Kerr. "Thank you ever so much for your information. I'm very grateful to you."

"You're welcome," Kerr responded; and then, overcome by his natural village curiosity, he demanded: "Say, what do you want to know all this about Martha for, anyway? Ain't goin' to try to get her to go on the stage, are you?" The idea appealed to him as enormously funny, and he tilted back his head and laughed heartily at his own joke.

"Well, er—not exactly." Cleary had no intention of telling Kerr any more than he had to. "To tell the truth, I'm not sure that I want anything with her, but she's so unusually beautiful that she excited my curiosity. I did think that she might be a possibility in my work, but if she's going to get married I suppose I'll have to drop the idea. Just the same I'm grateful for your information. Thanks again. We'll drop in to-morrow to buy our supplies."

Cleary and Butler attended the social the next night and swore that they enjoyed it more than they had any show in years. As a matter of fact, the performance itself was a small part of the entertain-

ment. The stage was merely a high rostrum at one end of the hall, and booths had been built at each side of it. There the ladies of the Dorcas Aid Society sold refreshments and the products of their needlework, mainly blue and white checked gingham aprons. After the performance, the floor was cleared of chairs, and everybody, children as well as grown people, played games.

But it was the performance that interested the men from the city, and they ached with badly repressed laughter as they looked and listened. First, the minister, a sleek-looking man with oily black hair and a cadaverous face, prayed mournfully; then the children of the Sunday-school sang a couple of songs, scoring a real success with "Let the Merry Sunshine In." The minister acted as the announcer, and every time he spoke Cleary clutched Butler's arm and giggled hysterically.

"He beats any interlocutor in the business," he whispered. "Listen to him, Phil."

"The children of Miss Melton's Sunday-school class will sing for you," said the minister unctuously, beaming paternally at the audience. "The little children will sing for you." He turned to the black calico curtains behind him. "Ready, children," he called, and ten little boys and girls trooped shamefacedly out on the rostrum and finally formed into a line after considerable shoving and whispered arguments about positions.

When they finished singing, the minister jovially shooed them off the stage and made his next announcement:

"The second number on our program is a recitation by little Mable Atkins. She will recite that beautiful poem entitled 'Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight.' It is a very dramatic poem, and I am sure that you will enjoy it. Ready, Mabel." Again he smiled, looking uncomfortably evil, his voice dripping honey as he called the little girl.

"Say," whispered Butler, "I would n't trust that old skunk with a plugged nickel."

"Shh. Shut up. Here comes Mabel."

Mabel was twelve years old, and in the last year she had gone mostly to legs. Her straight brown hair was parted in the middle, the part starting at her forehead and continuing to the nape of her neck, where it became the dividing line for two tight braids, each braid being tied close to her head with a piece of narrow blue ribbon. Her white dress was two inches too short and was starched until it stood gingerly away from her stick-like legs. She blinked her brown eyes shyly at the audience, scratched her freckled nose, and then, remembering her lessons, grabbed her skirt with each hand and ducked suddenly as if an invisible bad boy had suddenly cracked her in the hinges of her knees with a stick.

Cleary rolled and twisted in his chair. "Oh, my

God, my God!" he sputtered. "Is it possible? Look at her, Phil. For God's sake, look at her."

"Shh," hissed Butler. "People are looking at you."

Mabel squeaked the thrilling tale of the maiden and the curfew while the audience listened with silent admiration. She had been taught gestures, but she always seemed to think of them after the appropriate moment, with the result that her thin arms would suddenly dart from her sides and wave excitedly about while she spoke startlingly unsuitable lines. She was vigorously applauded, however, and Cleary's neighbor remarked admiringly that that Mabel Atkins was awful smart.

Cleary and Butler were equally amused by the rest of the program, a song by the village tenor, a dialogue between two small girls, and a recitation by a ten-year-old boy that suddenly ended in the middle. His mother prompted him sibilantly from the audience, but he had apparently gone deaf; at any rate, he paid no attention to her prompting but broke into shamed sobs and was led from the platform.

There was an interlude while the boy was comforted behind the calico curtains. Then the minister appeared once more and advanced to the center of the stage.

"The next and last number on our program will

be a solo by Mrs. Martha McLeod, a solo by Mrs. Martha McLeod—in costume. Mrs. McLeod will accompany herself on her guitar, and she will sing ‘La Paloma,’ a beautiful Spanish song. ‘La Paloma’ by Mrs. Martha McLeod.”

Cleary and Butler sat stiffly erect, staring over the heads of the people in front of them. At last the curtains parted. The audience gave one collective gasp and broke into enthusiastic applause. They took Martha McLeod, seamstress, for granted, but Martha McLeod, transformed into an actress, startled them into involuntary admiration.

She had brushed her hair until it shone like black satin and dressed it into a bizarre coiffure that was a silky, gleaming miracle. Instead of arranging her hair in its usual simple pompadour, she had parted it in the middle and drawn it low so that it touched her cheeks and hid her ears. Then she had piled it into an enormous loop that stood three inches above her head, and behind the loop flared a yellow tortoise-shell comb twice its size. Except for her lips, which seemed even pinker than usual, her face was entirely without color, and her eyes vied with her hair in blackness and light. Covering one shoulder and almost entirely hiding her white dress was a black Spanish shawl, flaming with red and orange flowers. It was drawn so tightly about her that her slender grace was emphasized into rich curves that were further emphasized by the wide sweep of her

full skirt. From a modest church singer she had suddenly flowered into a dazzling beauty, a brilliant exotic creature, provocative with new mystery.

"God in heaven!" whispered Cleary reverently, for once not taking the name of his Lord in vain. "God in heaven!"

"I should say so!" It was Butler this time who was clenching Cleary's arm. "She's perfect!"

"No, you fool, not perfect," whispered the experienced showman. "There's not enough light, for one thing." The stage was dimly lighted by a dozen candles backed with tin reflectors. "In a spot-light her hair would blind you. And she needs make-up. She can stand twice as much color on her lips and a lot on her cheeks, too. Oh, Lord, just give me a chance to fix her up!" he prayed fervently, his jowls quivering in his excitement.

"You're too damn particular," grumbled Butler. "She can have me as she stands."

"Shut up. She's starting to sing."

Thrilled by the impression she knew she had made, Martha glowed like a jewel and sang with a fire and daring new to her. Her eyes sparkled, her body swayed to the sharp rhythm of the music, her lips quivered with smiles, her voice rang triumphantly. In the bare, ugly little hall, she glittered like a diamond set in tin, her dazzling beauty lighted by tallow-candles and backed by a strip of black calico, her rich voice accompanied by a tinkling guitar and

applauded by sleepy farmers and their tired wives, hard-faced gamblers, and grinning vaqueros.

She was forced to give two encores, but to Cleary and Butler "Annie Laurie" and "Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt" were sad anticlimaxes to "La Paloma." Martha was too vivid for sentimental songs, too happily alive, too gay, too flashing.

When the chairs had been cleared from the floor, they began to search for her, but they were informed that she had gone home as soon as she had finished singing. They hurried out of the hall and groped their way through the darkness to her house. They swore at the unlighted lanes and swore even more vigorously when they found the house bleakly dark.

"Damn it," said Cleary angrily. "Now we'll have to wait until Sunday to leave. I've got to see her before we go; that's all there is to it. She may get married before we get back, and then there won't be a chance in the world of getting her."

"There does n't seem to be much chance, anyway," Butler remarked pessimistically. "She is n't going to give up the village millionaire to go on the stage."

"Oh, is n't she? Well, you wait. I've got a trick up my sleeve that I bet will fetch her. Phil, she's a find, and you can bet your bottom dollar I'm not going to let her slip through my fingers if I can help it. Beauty, a voice, stage presence—everything! God, what a woman!"

"All right, all right; have it your way. Let's go back to that so-called hotel, though. I'm cold."

The next morning Cleary called on Martha alone, having told Butler that he would be in the way. He was almost disappointed when she opened the door and stood before him clad in a simple pink house-dress, her hair once more reduced to a modest pompadour and smooth coil on top of her head. She looked at him questioningly.

"You are Mrs. McLeod?" he asked, taking off his hat and revealing a bald head.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. McLeod," she answered quietly.

"My name is James Cleary. I'm from San Francisco, a theatrical manager, and I'd like to talk to you alone if you don't mind."

"Why, no; I don't mind. It's all right, I guess. Come in."

When they were seated, Cleary began carefully. "I think I'd better tell you this story from the beginning so that you will understand," he said, his plump cheeks swelling into a smile. "I was passing your house the other day, and you were sitting outside there singing."

"Oh, yes, I was drying my hair, and Frank Cross had asked me to sing for him."

"Well, you probably didn't know it, Mrs. McLeod, but you made an unusually beautiful picture sitting there, and you made an even more beautiful one last night at the social."

"Oh, were you there?" Martha exclaimed. "Was n't it awful when little Johnnie Peters broke down? I felt so sorry for him."

"Yes, it was hard on the little chap, but I guess most of us have broken down one time or another speaking pieces at school. Well, let me go on about you. I suppose you would be surprised to know that I've got great plans for you."

Martha was naturally very much confused by Cleary's visit and very curious to learn the reason for it. His last remark completed her confusion and made her open her eyes wide in surprise. "Plans for me? Why, what do you mean?"

"Yes, ma'am, I've got plans for you; great plans they are, too." He hitched his chair toward her and leaned forward until his paunch rested comfortably on his thighs. "If you'll give me half a chance, I'll make you rich and famous."

"Rich and famous!" Martha exclaimed. "Why, Mr. Cleary, I have n't an idea of what you are talking about. You don't want me to go on the stage, do you?"

"Exactly that!" he cried, slapping his knee. "Exactly that! You've got the looks, the voice, the stage presence—everything! I can make a headliner out of you in a year. Vaudeville is becoming a big thing, and it's going to get lots bigger. Every city of any size has a vaudeville theater now, and it

won't be long before there'll be an Orpheum in every large city in the country."

Martha had very vague notions of what vaudeville was and no notion at all of what the Orpheum might be; so she asked Cleary, and he explained the nature of vaudeville and told her that the Orpheum was a big theater in San Francisco where he would start her.

"We'll bill you as a Spanish prima donna," he continued, "a singer from the court of Spain. I'll get a teacher to teach you some Spanish songs and another to teach you a couple of Spanish dances, and you'll be all set."

"Oh, I could n't; I—"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "Wait a minute! Don't you say you can't until you know all about it. I'll give you a hundred dollars a week and your gowns. That's just to start with, and, believe me, they'll be some gowns! There's no reason why you should n't become a head-liner, and if you do you'll get five hundred a week."

"Five hundred dollars a week!" Martha gasped unbelievably. "You don't mean that."

"I do mean that. You're a born actress if there ever was one. Ninety per cent of the stage beauties are n't half as beautiful as you are, and not one in a hundred has a voice like yours. Think of it! You'll go everywhere—San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago,

Philadelphia, New York, Boston—everywhere. And yes, by G—by—by the Lord Harry, you 'll probably go to Europe, too. You 'll have everything—money, clothes, people crazy about you. You 'll live in the best hotels. You 'll—”

“Please wait!” Martha cried, interrupting him. “Please wait. It all sounds so wonderful that it's taken my breath away, but there's no use talking about it. I can't go away from Covelo because I'm going to get married.”

“Yes, I heard about that.” Cleary hitched his chair still a little closer and lowered his voice. “May I talk to you very frankly, Mrs. McLeod? I don't want to offend you, but I can't make my point without being very frank.”

Martha looked at him wonderingly. “Why, yes,” she agreed slowly. “Go ahead. I don't think you will offend me.”

“I don't want to, but I want to make your position in Covelo quite clear, and I think when you understand that position, you'll think better of my offer. I've been here two days, and I've spent most of my time talking to people about you. Well, I guess I've heard about all there is to tell.” He hesitated and then added warily: “All about your mother and father and the people who brought you up and your husband and the man you're planning to marry. Now, I've never been in Round Valley before—I just happened to hear that it was a good

place to go hunting, and I 'm crazy about hunting—well, as I said, I 've never been here before, but I 've learned a lot about this town in a couple of days. It 's about the most narrow-minded, the most ignorant, the smuggest place I have ever seen. I don't like to say this, Mrs. McLeod, but you must know it as well as I do: you are superior to nine tenths of the people up here, and more than nine tenths of them condescend to you. I 've been told that they 're nice to you now because you 're engaged to a rich young man who holds a lot of mortgages, but you know perfectly well that these stupid people are n't going to really accept you."

The truth in his words hurt Martha, and, as usual when she was hurt, she lifted her head proudly. "I 've got along pretty well," she said, her voice sharp and cold. She did not think it worth while to inform him that she was not engaged to a rich young man but to an exceedingly poor young vaquero.

"It 's brave of you to say that, Mrs. McLeod, but I 've heard that you have n't had but one real friend and that she died a few months back. Think it over: if you stay here, these people will just suffer you to exist; that 's all; and they are people who are inferior to you. If you go on the stage, you 'll be courted by people who would n't condescend to look at the yokels in this valley. You 'll be somebody, and," he added softly, insinuatingly, "you 'll be Spanish."

Frank had to return to the ranch Thursday night, but his kisses were still sweet on Martha's lips. She shook her head slowly. "You tempt me," she acknowledged, "but I'm afraid I can't do it. I can't get married and go on the stage, too; and I'm going to get married."

"Is any man worth the sacrifice?" Cleary pleaded. "Is any man worth it?"

Martha smiled. "This one is," she replied softly, and when Cleary saw the light in her eyes, he knew that he was beaten. He picked up his hat and rose to go.

"That's what you think now, Mrs. McLeod, but you may change your mind. I'm up here with a friend, and we're leaving to-morrow for Hull Valley, maybe this afternoon. We're going hunting and fishing up Hull Creek, and we may be gone several weeks. Will you withhold your decision until I get back? Promise me you won't get married until you see me again. I know that that is an impertinent request, but this is a serious matter for both of us."

"Oh, there is n't a chance that I'll get married before you get back; so you need n't worry about that. I promise to think it over, but I know that my answer will have to be no."

Cleary smiled dubiously and walked to the door. Martha held it open for him. "Good-by," she said. "It was nice of you to make me the offer, anyway."

"Don't talk as if it were all settled," he protested, holding out his hand; and as Martha placed hers in it, he added: "Look for me in two or three weeks, and you are going to have to put up an awfully good argument to get rid of me. Good-by."

"Good-by."

Martha said the farewell quietly enough, but her smooth forehead puckered in thought as she watched the little man waddle importantly to the front gate.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the two weeks that followed, Martha had good reason to consider Cleary's offer seriously. When neither she nor Wally appeared at church the Sunday she broke her engagement to him, the congregation had naturally noted their absence and commented on it; the remarks, however, had not exceeded expressions of casual curiosity. But when Wally appeared alone the following Sunday, the curiosity was no longer casual.

Mrs. Kerwin was standing in front of the church gossiping with a couple of women when Wally approached. The three women bowed and Wally touched his hat.

"Where 's Martha?" asked Mrs. Kerwin. "Is n't she coming to-day?"

"I don't know," Wally replied, intending to pass and enter the church, but Mrs. Kerwin blocked his path.

"You don't know?" she cried. "Why, what 's the matter? You and Martha ain't split up, have yuh?"

Wally looked coldly at her, answered shortly, "Yes, we have," and, quickly stepping past her, reached the steps.

The service started five minutes later, but before

the voluntary was played, every member of the congregation knew that Wallace Gardner and Martha McLeod had broken their engagement, and the little white church buzzed with whispered comment.

Martha's divorce from Dan had caused talk enough, but Dan had been only a vaquero, while Wally was a person of vast importance. Even the feud between Keene's and Simms's men took second place to the broken engagement in the back-fence meetings and the bar-room symposia. Of course, every one sought to discover the reason for the estrangement, and since nobody dared approach either Martha or Wally, everybody guessed, and their guesses were amazingly accurate. Frank's visits had not gone unnoted, and it was generally agreed that they were primarily responsible for the quarrel. The gossips made only one mistake: they thought that Wally had broken the engagement, and they thought that simply because they could n't imagine any woman letting go of Wallace Gardner once she had him hooked. Martha's relations with Frank were promptly branded as immoral—"no decent woman would be seein' a vaquero when she was engaged to a man like Gardner"—and within twenty-four hours Martha found herself ostracized.

She did not venture outside the house Sunday because Frank was with her, but on Monday she made a visit to Kerr's store. When she passed the saloons, the men peered at her through the open doors and

exchanged meaningful glances and sly remarks, a few of which she heard. There were two women in the store, and when she spoke to them they both ignored her. On her way home she passed another woman who neither looked at her nor responded to her greeting. Then Martha knew that Round Valley had discovered her affair with Frank, and she knew, too, that she was forever damned.

Life became ghastly. Frank had left that day for Fort Bragg with a drove of cattle and would be gone for at least two weeks, he said, since he had to go on to Eureka to get a prize bull that Simms had bought. She had felt alone before, but never so alone as now. There literally was n't a woman for her to talk to except Aunt Ann, and the men terrified her. She could n't venture out of the house without being leered at and perhaps indecently approached. Not a night passed that at least one man did not knock at her door. Some of the men awkwardly disguised their purpose behind the pretense of a friendly visit; most of them said openly what they wanted, and a few of them frankly offered her money. After five nights of repelling callers, she locked her doors and windows and refused to answer any knocks, no matter how imperative.

She had two weeks of thinking and isolation, two weeks in which to look at her past and plan for her future.

She knew that she was socially an outcast in Round

Valley and that nothing could ever restore her to good standing. All that she had builded so carefully was forever destroyed. She knew, too, that it would be almost impossible for her again to earn her living as a seamstress, and her reckless buying had sadly depleted her slender savings. Of course, Frank could support her, but badly, very badly. Hour after hour she thought about her dilemma. What could she do? What could she do?

Fully a week passed before she even seriously thought of accepting Cleary's offer; and when it first occurred to her, she rejected it instantly. Leaving Round Valley meant leaving Frank, and such a thing was not to be thought of even at the pain of social ostracism. A second week of loneliness and insults made the offer look more attractive, however; and as the horrible days slowly dragged by, she thought of it more and more seriously. She was not interested in the large salary she would get any more than she had been interested in Wally's wealth, but she saw clearly that if she went on the stage she would not only escape from Round Valley completely but she would at the same time establish herself finally and completely as a white woman. Cleary had been infinitely clever in stressing that fact, and it was a tantalizing temptation.

Coldly, calmly she balanced Frank against the stage; love, poverty, and insults against fame, wealth, and respect. Almost at once everything was

dropped from her calculations except love and respect. Which mattered more? At first, love led easily, but as each day brought more insults, it withered before the glamour of respect. At the end of two weeks she decided to accept Cleary's offer, and she awaited his return from the mountains even more eagerly than she awaited Frank's return from Eureka. To get away from Covelo, to escape the lascivious, lustful men, the sneering, frigid women, that would be heaven itself.

Frank arrived in the valley Sunday morning; Cleary arrived Sunday night.

Frank walked suddenly into the kitchen.

"Hullo, sweetness," he cried; "hullo!" and stretched his arms wide. She stood rigidly still for an instant; then, "Frank!" she screamed, "Frank!" and threw herself into his arms. She cried in her delight; it was so good to be loved again, to be hurt in his strong embrace, to hear him crooning over her tenderly, to feel his warm kisses on her lips.

When their rapture had spent itself, she told him of her plan.

"I'm going away, Frank," she said softly, almost shyly.

"Goin' away?" He drew her fiercely to him. "You ain't goin' to do nothin' of the sort."

"Yes, I am. Listen, Frank dear. People have found out about us, and they are making life terrible for me. There is n't a woman in town that'll even

“speak to me, and the men say dirty things and try to get smart. I can’t go on living here, Frank; I just can’t—not even for you. I don’t think Wally told them about us—he’s not that kind—but they know just the same.”

“Did you tell Wally?” he asked sullenly.

“Yes, when I gave him back his ring and told him that I would n’t marry him.”

“You never told me that you’d given him back his ring. When did you do that?” His voice was heavy with hurt, not because she had broken her engagement to Wally, of course, but because she had said that she was going away.

Martha stroked his curls pacifyingly, and her manner was almost maternal when she replied: “Oh, weeks ago. I could n’t keep the ring. Don’t be silly, sweetheart. You know that I could n’t keep it.” She hesitated and then continued slowly while Frank gazed at her with confusion in his eyes: “Now, listen to me, Frank dear. I love you better than anything else in the world, and if I could be with you all the time, I would n’t mind the other people, and I would n’t have anything to do with Mr. Cleary.”

“Mr. Cleary? Who’s he?” Frank demanded jealously.

Martha laughed. “Don’t get angry, Frank. He’s a funny little man with a bald head and a pot-belly. Do you remember the day I was drying my hair out

in the yard and singing 'La Paloma' for you? Well, he was outside the fence listening, and he went to the social the next night and heard me sing again. Well, he 's a theatrical manager, and he wants me to go on the stage. He 'll give me a hundred dollars a week to start and says that I ought to get five hundred before long."

"Five hundred dollars a week!" exclaimed Frank, sitting up in his astonishment. "Aw, Martha, he 's stringin' yuh. There ain't nobody that makes that much money—nobody!"

"No," she responded slowly; "no, I don't think he 's stringing me. He 's telling the truth all right, I think; and, Frank, it will mean everything to me. I 'll get away from this terrible valley, and I 'll have plenty of money."

"Yes—and what about me? What am I goin' to do without yuh?" He sulked like a small boy who knows that he is being unjustly treated.

Martha drew his head to her breast and kissed his black curls. "Don't talk that way, Frank dearest," she begged; "please don't talk that way. I can't stand it. It 's going to break my heart to leave you; it breaks my heart even to think about it, but what can I do? I can't earn a living any more. There is n't a woman in the valley that will give me a stitch of sewing to do; and oh, Frank, I 'm so lonely when you 're away! You can't imagine how lonely I am. I told you before that I would n't mind

the other people if you could be with me all the time, but you can't. It is n't your fault, dearest, that you have to be away weeks at a time, but it 's terrible on me. I can't stand it, Frank; I can't."

He drew his head out of her arms and sat up. "Now, Martha, you listen to me. I guess I can support you. I don't make very much, but you can have every nickel I get. I promise yuh I'll cut out gamblin', and I ain't never broke my word to nobody. I won't even bet on a dead certainty. It won't be very much coin, but it 'll be enough for you to live on. Gosh, honey, I can't get along without yuh." He pillowed his head again on her bosom. "Oh, Martha sweetness, you won't go away and leave me, will yuh?"

He pleaded with her all day and most of the night, pleaded with kisses and caresses, pleaded with broken words of love, pleaded with his need for her, and most of all pleaded with a wistful smile that hurt her more than any words of reproof could have. He talked of his loneliness without her, told her how sweet she was, how good; he assured her over and over again that he loved her as he had never loved any one before, and his earnestness was so pathetic, so sincere, that she promised before he left at five in the morning that she would stay with him. Her common sense told her that she was making a mistake, but common sense had never brought her any happiness; common sense, or what she took for it,

had made her marry Dan McLeod; common sense had made her engage herself to Wally Gardner; and common sense, if she had obeyed it, would have made her send Frank away long ago. No, common sense was a traitor; it had betrayed her twice, and the one time she ignored it she had found happiness. She would ignore it again. Frank's love was worth the respect of a thousand people.

Cleary called that Monday morning at ten o'clock.

"Well, Mrs. McLeod, how are you?" he cried. "I've had a wonderful trip. I caught dozens of the most wonderful trout in the world. Honest, the trout up here fried in bacon make anything at the Palace Hotel seem like hog-feed. I killed a buck, too, a great big fellow with four prongs. What do you know about that? I've gone hunting for years, but I never once got a buck before."

The little man had lost ten pounds and acquired a tan that made him look almost healthy. He sat down in Martha's best rocking-chair and beamed at her. "My trip has been perfect, and it will be super-perfect if you will just tell me that you're going to let me make you famous."

Martha shook her head. "I don't think so, Mr. Cleary. I've thought your offer over very seriously, and for a time I thought that I was going to accept it. As I told you before, I'm going to get married and—"

"And I told you before," interrupted Cleary, "that no man was worth the sacrifice."

Twenty-four hours earlier Martha would have agreed with him, but in those twenty-four hours Frank had intervened, Frank with his appealing smile, his small-boy need for her, his tenderness, his passion; and Frank was strong in her memory.

She smiled and replied, "I think I told you before that this one is." Her dusky cheeks grew daintily pink. "He is to me, anyway. You tempted me, tempted me a lot, Mr. Cleary, but, honestly, I can't do it."

She spoke with such finality that Cleary knew she meant what she said. He rose to go.

"I 'm mighty sorry, Mrs. McLeod, mighty sorry, for your sake as well as my own, because I think you 're making a big mistake; and because I honestly do think that it is a mistake I 'm going to leave my offer open. If anything comes up to change your mind, you come to San Francisco and look me up at the Orpheum. Will you promise to do that?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, I promise. I don't think there is any chance, but if anything happens to make me change my mind, I 'll look you up. I 'll be glad to."

He held out his hand. "Good-by, Mrs. McLeod. I won't be a bit surprised to see you; and I 'll be mighty glad, too."

Martha placed her hand in his and smiled dubiously. "We'll see," she said. "Good-by."

Once again she watched him waddle to the gate, and this time her eyes were wistful. He was taking such a lot with him, such a lot. . . .

Cleary sought Butler. "Come on and have a drink," he grumbled. "I need it."

"What's the matter? Did she turn you down?"

"Hell, yes! Women are such awful damn fools!"

CHAPTER XXII

SEPTEMBER died miserably for Martha, and October was born in agony. Her days were monotonously alike, bleak and empty. She never ventured out of the house except to buy food or to hurry through her back yard to Aunt Ann's cottage for a brief visit. A few of the rougher men spoke to her, sometimes courteously. They no longer made unpleasant advances, partly because they knew that they would be repelled, and partly because it was generally understood that she was Frank Cross's woman; and no one dared to tamper with anything belonging to Frank Cross. Except for their brief salutations, she never had a word spoken to her except by Aunt Ann or Frank, and Frank's visits were necessarily brief and rather distantly spaced.

She made the new clothes, largely because she had to do something to occupy her time, but she felt positive that she would never wear most of them. She resigned church without a sigh, but she did not so easily give up the occasional entertainments, another church social, Zamloch the magician's annual visit, and a performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by a traveling company. She did not have the courage, however, to attend any public gathering. She

would be stared at, whispered about, and, worse yet, pointedly ignored.

In October her troubles came to a climax. She explained the situation to Frank on one of his rare visits.

"Frank," she said soberly, "I'm afraid we'll have to be married soon."

"Married?" he repeated blankly and stared at her.

"Yes. We'll have to be married right away." Her eyes were dull and tired, but they looked bravely into his as she added quietly, "I'm going to have a baby."

As usual when he was disturbed, Frank fingered his black curls.

"Hell!" he exclaimed, "I never thought of that!"

"I did n't either at first, but when I did at last, it did n't matter. Don't think that I care now, Frank. I'm glad in a way."

"Well, I'm not." His voice took on its sulky small-boy tone. "Are you certain?"

"Oh, yes. I wouldn't have said anything if I was n't. Yes, I'm certain, dear. I hate to ask you to get married now because I know it's awfully inconvenient. I know—"

"You're damn tootin' it's inconvenient," he cried peevishly. "It's inconvenient as hell."

They were in the parlor, and Martha rocked wearily in her chair for a few minutes before speak-

ing. Finally she said softly: "I know, Frank dear, and I'm sorry, awfully sorry, but I can't stand any more. You don't know how it is, being treated the way I am. There's not a woman in town that'll talk to me. I can hardly bear to go out of the house. The men look at me so queerly, and I want to run when they speak to me, even when they're kind. I can't stand any more, Frank; I just can't. I'm so lonesome for you all the time, and you're here so seldom. Don't think that I'm blaming you, dearest, because I'm not. I know that you can't help it. Don't look at me that way, Frank!" she cried suddenly. "It's not my fault!"

"Well, it ain't mine, either," he grumbled; "least-ways, it ain't no more mine than it is yours, and I can't get married; that's all there is to it." He rolled a cigarette absent-mindedly and drew on it so vigorously that he smoked it to a butt in a few strong puffs.

"I never thought you'd talk that way," Martha whispered; "I never thought it." She held her hand to her left side. She wondered if her heart was breaking, it hurt so. Did people's hearts really break? Perhaps hers was. She didn't care. . . .

Frank hurled his cigarette-butt viciously into the fireplace. "I don't give a damn what you thought," he cried. "Don't talk to me that way and look at me as if I was beatin' yuh. I ain't done nothin'. I never said I wanted to get married, did I?" He

jumped up and leaned over her excitedly. "Jes' tell me once when I said I wanted to get married; jes' tell me once!"

Martha looked up at his flushed face and answered unhappily: "You may not have said exactly that, Frank, I suppose, but I thought that you wanted to. You said over and over again that you loved me, and I supposed that was what you meant."

Outraged, Frank stood erect and backed off to look at her. "Love yuh? Of course, I said I loved yuh! I did love yuh; I do now, but what in God's name has that got to do with gettin' married? Hell, I never thought once of gettin' married." He threw himself in a chair and sprawled in it, scowling miserably at Martha.

"But, Frank," she objected, "you talked about us living together, and you offered to support me."

"Of course, I did. I said I'd give you my last nickel, and I will." He pulled a doeskin purse out of his pocket and shook it until the money in it jingled. "You can have every cent in that purse right now," he cried. "Do you think I'm goin' back on my word? Of course, I'll support yuh! Did you think I was lyin'?"

Martha's tired head lifted itself proudly, and her dull eyes brightened with an angry gleam. "And did you think," she demanded, "that I would live with you for money? Did you think that I gave up Wally Gardner for your few nickels? Were

you fool enough to think that I turned down a hundred dollars a week to starve on what you could give me?"

Frank's eyes fell, and his cheeks reddened with shame. "I did n't think," he muttered.

"No; no, you did n't think." Martha was still angry, and her voice cut. "I don't suppose you've ever thought. You've never thought what I've given up for you. Well, I've had plenty of time to think about what I've given up, and I'm going to tell you what it is. Listen: I've given up my chance to earn a living. Do you understand that? I can't earn a nickel in this valley; no, not if I went down on my knees and begged for work. I've given up every chance I ever had to have a friend. You're all that I've got left, and now you're turning away from me because I ask you to do what any decent man would do."

He dared not meet her flashing eyes, and his head sank lower and lower as he stared at the floor. "That's not all," she continued, her voice ringing angrily. "I gave up Wallace Gardner, as fine a man as ever lived. He loved me, and he wanted to take care of me, to give me everything. Do you understand that? He promised me the finest house in the valley, a girl to do the work for me, a trip to San Francisco—everything. And what can you give me? You can give me your name, and that's all I ask for in exchange; and you won't."

Her voice broke in her bitterness, and tears began to glint on her lashes, but she went on to the end while Frank grew redder and redder and twisted his fingers miserably. "I gave up a chance to go on the stage for you. I gave it up because you begged me not to go. You said that you loved me, that you could n't get along without me. You know you did. I gave up the chance to get out of this horrible valley and have everything in the world. I've given up my life for you, Frank Cross, and you sit there sulking and won't give me one thing in exchange. You lied to me and told me that you loved me; you—"

"I did n't!" he cried, lifting his eyes to meet hers. "I did n't, Martha. I swear to God, I did n't. I did love yuh. I love yuh now better 'n anything on earth. I did n't realize all you was givin' up. All I thought about was that I loved yuh and wanted yuh. I'm sorry you gave up so much for me. I guess I ain't worth it."

His assurance that he loved her and the humility in his voice and manner softened Martha's anger into instant tenderness.

"I did n't mean to hurt you that way, Frank dear," she said gently, "but I had to make you understand. I don't care about any of it just as long as you love me. I'd give up more than that any time for you. You are worth it. You're worth everything to me."

Frank smiled at her shyly, like a small boy who thinks that he has been forgiven his transgressions but is n't sure. "You 're awful sweet, Martha. I ain't good enough for yuh." His smile broadened happily as an answering one trembled on her lips.

"Oh, yes, you are! Yes, you are!" she exclaimed, her face shining with love and relief. "Then we are going to get married, Frank, and everything will be all right."

Instantly his eyes darkened, and his jaw set stubbornly. "I ain't goin' to get married," he muttered. "I ain't never said that I was goin' to."

"What?" Martha's eyes blinked dazedly, and her lips parted in astonishment. "What?"

"I said I ain't goin' to get married."

"But, Frank, why not? I don't understand. You tell me that you love me better than anything on earth, and yet you say that you won't marry me, though you know my life 'll be ruined if you don't."

"I don't want your life ruined, but I ain't goin' to get married." He looked her straight in the eye, ashamed but determined.

"Frank," demanded Martha, rising nervously to her feet, "what 's the matter? Why won't you get married? Are you married already?"

"Of course I ain't."

"Well then, what 's the trouble? Tell me." Her voice was pleading, insistent, and her eyes were tragic with fear.

His reply was a sullen mumble. "I ain't goin' to say nothin'."

"Yes, you are! You 've got to tell me! What 's the trouble? Tell me, Frank."

"Well, if you 've got to know," he replied, looking up at her for an instant and then letting his glance fall, "I ain't goin' to marry an Injun. You ought to know that." There was no insolence in his voice, no condescension; he was merely stating an unpleasant fact, and he stated it with obvious reluctance.

Martha started back in her surprise. She was not insulted, nor was she hurt, but she was completely dumfounded.

"But, Frank," she said stutteringly, "Frank—why, Frank, you 've got Indian blood yourself."

He leaped to his feet as if she had lashed him with a whip; automatically his right hand clutched for his revolver in his back trousers pocket; his face turned ghastly white under its tan; and his eyes sparkled insanely.

"Shet up!" he screamed. "Shet up, you damn squaw! I'm white. I'm white, do yuh hear? White! I ain't no Injun, and no Injun can tell me that I am one; nor no white man, neither. Shet up or I 'll shoot hell outta yuh!"

Quite unafraid, Martha looked at him. For the moment contempt downed every other emotion. "So that 's it," she said slowly, bitterly; "so that 's it.

Well, I suppose you are whiter than I am, though you don't look it, and God above knows you don't act it. You—"

"Shet up!" he interrupted furiously. "*Shet up!*"

A slow terrible anger was taking possession of her, an anger that matched his own. "You—you—" she began, but again Frank interrupted.

"Aw, go to hell!" he shouted; and, flinging the door open, he rushed out of the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

FRANK hurried to the stable a hundred yards distant and tore into the stall where he had left Hell Fire. Snatching down the bridle, saddle, and blanket from a wooden peg, he threw them on the nervous horse and paid no attention to its whinnying for the sugar that had always been forthcoming before. Without waiting to pay the owner his bill, he leaped on the horse and started it out of the stable and down the road at a mad run, digging his big spurs unmercifully into its flanks.

Eventually Hell Fire grew tired of running and slowed down, first into a fast gallop and then into a rapid jog. Frank paid no attention to the animal's change of pace. His mind was boiling, and he spat out bitter oaths as if they were nauseating weeds. By the time he was well in the mountains, however, his mind began to clear, and the oaths dwindled into bitter silence. In a couple of hours he became calm, and when he stabled Hell Fire in the ranch barn he thought to give the horse its ration of sugar.

Weary and unhappy he sought the bunk-house, where he was sure he would find Jack Young, another vaquero and his bosom-friend. Young had a

bad cold and had not been working for several days. He was sitting in front of the bunk-house dejectedly smoking a cigarette.

"Back already, Frank?" he said hoarsely. "I thought you was goin' to stay all night."

"I was goin' to, but I had a fight with Martha," Frank replied, throwing himself on the ground and scowling at the dry grass.

"No?" Young exclaimed. He had long been privy to Frank's love-affair and knew how deeply he cared for the girl. "Why, what's the matter?"

"She's goin' to have a baby."

"Damn!"

"Your damn tootin' damn. Give me your sack of Durham, Jack. I've smoked up all of mine."

Young tossed him the sack of tobacco and remarked thoughtfully: "But that ain't nothin' to fight about, Frank. It ain't her fault. You did n't go and get mad at her, did you, jes' because she's goin' to have a baby?"

The question angered Frank so much that he spilled the tobacco from the paper, an unheard-of piece of clumsiness. He swore fervently and turned on Young. "You damn fool, of course I did n't get mad at her on account of that. What do you think I am, anyway? I got mad at somethin' else, and now," he added softly, playing with the cigarette-paper to hide his embarrassment, "I'm sorry as hell. I got to thinkin' about it on the way

back, and, damn it, Jack, I acted awful rotten. But she said somethin' that made me mad, and you know me when I get mad; I ain't got no sense a-tall. Why, I come near shootin' her; I swear I did."

"No! You never did!"

"I did. I was plumb crazy, Jack." He rolled the cigarette, lighted it, and puffed at it ruminatively. "I sure acted rotten," he added, more to himself than to Young.

"Why, what happened?"

Frank looked up at him; his face troubled, his eyes dull with worry and shame. "Well, it was this way," he began. "I got upset when she told me about the baby."

"Of course," Young agreed consolingly. "Anybody would. I would myself."

"Then pretty soon she come out and said we'd have to get married. I said I would n't do it, and she wanted to know why not. I did n't want to tell her, and I bucked around this way and that tryin' not to, but she hung on, and finally I jes' nacherally had to tell her."

"What did you say?"

"Gosh, I hate to say it again. I've been thinkin' it over on the way back, Jack, and I ought n't to 'a' said it no matter what she said. I done wrong; that's all there is to it. I acted bad. It ain't her fault if she's a breed, and I did n't have no right to say nothin' about it. She's gone and done every-

thing for me, Jack, every damn thing I've wanted her to, and she sent Wally Gardner away, and she sent away that city man that wanted to give her a hundred dollars a week to go on the stage, and now nobody in Covelo will talk to her on account of me. Oh, damn it, Jack," he cried piteously, "I acted awful rotten to her."

Young knew Frank too well to ask any further questions, and he guessed easily what Martha had said that had made him so angry. He evaded any direct comment by asking cautiously: "What are you goin' to do? Anything?"

"Yes, by damn!" he cried, leaping to his feet and bending excitedly over Young. "I'm goin' right back down there, and I'm goin' to get down on my dirty, good-for-nothin' knees and beg her to marry me. Jack, I love that girl better'n anything on earth; and I treated her terrible, jes' terrible. I'm goin' to try to make her forgive me; and if she will I'm goin' to spend the rest of my life tryin' to make up to her for the way I acted. Will you let me have your hoss? I rode Hell Fire awful hard, and he's all in."

"Sure, you can have him. But you look kinda in yourself," Young said solicitously.

"I'm goin' to be a damn sight more in if she won't forgive me," Frank replied, desperate with shame. "I acted awful rotten, Jack, awful."

He had reached the ranch late in the afternoon,

and it was twilight when he started down the steep mountain road to ride twenty miles for the third time that day. He rode as rapidly, nevertheless, as the failing twilight and the roughness of the road permitted, constantly urging the horse on.

So deep was he in thought and so eager for haste that he did not hear another horseman coming up the road. The other man heard him, however, and immediately stopped his horse and listened. Once he was sure that some one was coming, he dismounted and led his horse off the road far into the surrounding timber. There he tied him to a tree, and, moving cautiously and quietly, he returned to the road and hid himself in a clump of bushes that bordered it. He was a vicious-looking half-breed, dark almost as a full-blooded Indian, with small, wicked black eyes, a hatchet-face, and thin, cruel mouth. He said that his name was Smith, but no one believed him. His fellow vaqueros called him Pete, but everybody else spoke of him as Pomo Pete, partly because he was part Pomo but mainly because the alliteration pleased them.

Frank appeared around a turn in the road a few rods ahead. When Pete saw who it was, he grinned evilly, took out his revolver, and waited until Frank was only a couple of yards away. Then he deliberately lifted the revolver and fired. As Frank fell, Pete leaped from the bushes and caught the plunging, terrified horse by the bridle. No sense, he

thought, in letting the horse get away and rush riderless into the valley and give an alarm; besides, it was a good horse, one that he might as well keep. Not once had he looked at Frank. He knew perfectly that he had shot him through the heart. Why look to see if he was dead? When he had tied the horse to a tree, however, he did condescend to make sure; then he dragged the body into the bushes, retrieved his horse, and went happily on his way, richer by one horse and the pleasure of having satisfied a grudge.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR several minutes after Frank left, Martha stood still looking blankly ahead of her; then she moved mechanically to the door and closed it, her eyes empty, her face expressionless. She was not thinking, she was not even feeling; her mind and nerves seemed to have been stricken dead. Blindly, like a person in a dream, she sought a chair and sank slowly into it, staring with wide, unseeing eyes at the wall before her. Her hand crept gradually to her side and pressed tight against her heart, and then it slid nervelessly down into her lap, limp and inert like the hand of one newly dead.

Martha never knew how long she sat there, but the room was growing dark when she began to stiffen in the chair as life and intelligence flowed slowly back into her.

"Gone," she mumbled; "gone. He's gone."

At first she realized nothing but that she was alone, but the realization was dream-like, unreal, the nightmare of a person half awake.

Suddenly she leaped to her feet. "Frank!" she cried and listened intently. When there was no answer, her voice rose to a terrified shriek: "Frank! Frank!" She rushed through the house calling his

name, stumbling through the darkening rooms, holding her hands searchingly before her. "Frank! Frank, where are you?"

Full understanding burst on her like a flash of blinding light. Her hands dropped weakly to her sides, and, tottering weakly, she found a chair in the parlor again and collapsed into it.

Gone! He was gone! Fully conscious again, she considered the terrible fact and all its hideous suggestions. She was alone, deserted in her great need by the one creature she loved—so alone; Frank had gone. She was almost without money, she could not get any work in the valley, and she was going to have a baby; it was too late to go to San Francisco and seek Mr. Cleary—too late. She was going to have a baby—Frank's baby; and he had left her. She would never feel his strong arms around her again, never, never. . . . Tears streamed unheeded down her cheeks, but she did not sob; her eyes seemed to be weeping in independent sorrow. Frank had gone. . . . Frank! Frank's smile—she could see it in the darkness. Never to see that smile again, never to hear him call her sweetheart. . . . She had been so sure of him, so sure. It was too much; she could not stand it. Trembling in her agony, at last she bowed her face in her hands and sobbed, sobbed until she lay back in the chair weak and broken, too spent to sob any longer. Frank was gone. Nothing was left, nothing. . . .

He had said that he loved her, and he meant it; she knew he meant it. He had always been so gentle, so tender, and he had left her and called her an Indian. Indian! The word acted like an electric shock, bringing her erect and rigid in the chair. An Indian! That was it! He had left her because she was an Indian. He could n't marry a squaw. Suddenly she leaned back and laughed. She was one half Indian, and Frank was one eighth. That was the difference. Idiotically, her mind began to figure out that difference, One half made four eighths, did n't it? Yes, that was it, four eighths. And four eighths minus one eighth made three eighths. Three eighths! A difference of three eighths. It was funny, the funniest thing in the world, and she laughed at it, laughed until she shrieked with merriment. They were separated by arithmetic; she was ruined by a fraction. Oh, but it was funny! It was so funny, it was so funny that, so funny that . . .

"It 's so funny," she said aloud, wiping her tears with her sleeve; "it 's so funny it 's—it 's breaking my heart. Oh, my God, my God!" And once more she bent her head in her hands while the sobs tore themselves cruelly from her.

The time came at last when she could sob no more, when her tears were dried by the searing heat of thought. What was the use of living, she asked herself; what was the use of anything? She had tried so hard and she had lost everything because

she was an Indian, and no matter how hard or how long she tried, she would always be an Indian. And she hated the Indians, loathed them.

"I'm not one!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "I'm not one!" Up and down the floor she paced, mechanically missing the furniture, hitting her right fist into the palm of her left hand while she tried to see some light through the darkness of her life, so much darker than the darkness of the room. She looked white, she lived white, she felt white, and the whites said that she was an Indian, even Frank who—she laughed in sudden hysteria—who was three eighths less Indian than she was. No money, no friends, no one to turn to—and she was going to have a baby. Where could she go? What could she do?

Why, why, she moaned, could n't she have been all Indian or all white? One or the other—but not both. It was n't right to make a person neither one thing nor the other. No, no, it was n't right. Why did God do things that way?

God! *God?* Again she threw back her head and laughed. *God!* She had gone to church all her life and worshiped God. It was funny; it was—The laugh caught in her throat and choked her. They said in church that God was good, that God loved everybody; and yet God made half-breeds. God had made her love Frank, and God had made Frank hate Indians the way she hated them. God

was good, was He? God was—God was—God was the man who made half-breeds so that He could look down and laugh at them while they suffered. That's what He was!

"God!" she cried aloud, lifting her clenched fist and shaking it fiercely. "God! God! Damn . . . Damn. . . ." Her fist quivered impotent anathemas. "Damn. . . ."

She fell suddenly, striking the piano-keys with her arm. There was a rattling, discordant crash of notes, the heavy thud of her body hitting the floor, and then merciful silence.

CHAPTER XXV

AUNT ANN had called on Martha to ask for a "start" of yeast. She crossed the back porch and listened closely at the kitchen door to see if she could hear Frank. At first she heard nothing at all and was about to open the door; then she heard Martha's voice lifted angrily, the discord, and the fall of Martha's body. Frightened, she hurried through the kitchen into the parlor, and then, surprised by the silence and darkness, she stopped and called: "Martha! Wheah are you, Martha honey?" When she received no reply, she moved cautiously to the table, put down the tin cup she had in her hand, found the sulphur-matches in an abalone shell, and lighted the lamp.

Martha was lying in a clumsy heap on the floor in front of the piano. Notwithstanding her great age, Ann was remarkably swift and deft. She pulled the piano-stool out of the way and knelt by the unconscious girl. Putting her ear to her heart, she listened intently and smiled her relief. Quickly she opened Martha's dress and unhooked her corset, straightened her body until it was lying comfortably, and then hurried to the well for a cup of cold water.

She splashed it liberally over the ghastly face and forced some of it through Martha's lips, and was finally rewarded by seeing her begin to breathe more regularly. When Martha opened her eyes at last, she saw the old colored woman bending solicitously over her.

"Thah, thah, honey," Ann whispered; "you're all right. Aunt Ann's heah, chile. Don' you worry none."

At first Martha looked at her blankly, but gradually her eyes lightened with intelligence and then filled with tears.

"Aunt Ann," she wept; "oh, Aunt Ann!"

"Now, don' you cry, chile. You jes' lay right theah till you's feelin' bettah; then Aunt Ann'll put you to bed. You jes' wait; I'm a-goin' over to my house an' get some whisky. That'll set you up fine, honey chile."

She returned with the whisky with the same remarkable speed she had shown before, and after Martha had had a drink of the scorching liquor she felt stronger. Aunt Ann undressed her and put her to bed.

"You're so good to me, Aunt Ann," she said gratefully, letting her head sink into the soft pillow. "I needed you so much." Languidly she reached out and touched the wrinkled black hand. "You're the best woman in Round Valley."

Ann chuckled. "Don' be foolish, chile. Now you

go to sleep and don' worry. I'm a-goin' to be settin' right heah all night."

"Oh, you must n't. I'm all right. I just fainted; that's all." Again her eyes flooded with tears, and her body quivered with gasping sobs.

"What's the mattah, Martha? Tell Aunt Ann," the kind-hearted mammy pleaded. "Don' cry. Jes' tell me what's wrong, and we'll have it right jes' that quick."

Her pride broken by Frank's desertion and softened by Ann's sympathy, Martha forgot it entirely and told the whole story. Ann knew much of it already, but she let her tell it through without interruption.

"What am I going to do, Aunt Ann?" she cried when she had finished. "I've only got fifty dollars left, and I can't live for eight months on that, maybe longer, and you know I can't get any work. Where am I going to go? I can't stay here; I just can't."

Aunt Ann agreed with her but added cheerfully that there was n't a trouble in the world that could n't be taken care of somehow. She said that she was sure that she would have a plan by morning; and when morning came she was still sitting by Martha's bed and she had the plan.

"Why, Aunt Ann," Martha exclaimed when she woke up and saw the old woman, "I thought you were going home."

"I slep' gran' right heah, Martha honey, and I

would n't 'a' slep' a-tall if I 'd went home and lef' you heah alone. An', honey, I got the plan."

Martha sat up excitedly. "Oh, I knew you would, Aunt Ann. What is it? Tell me, please."

The plan was simple, but it seemed to overcome all difficulties. Ann explained that Martha must go to Susie up in Summit Valley and stay with her until the baby was born. Fifty dollars would be wealth in Summit Valley, where there was n't even a store. Furthermore, Ann knew of some one to whom she could sell Martha's furniture, and she thought that she could get another fifty dollars for it. Then there was the horse, which, old though it was, would probably fetch twenty-five dollars. Martha's poverty disappeared in the optimistic light of Ann's calculations.

"Now, honey," Ann concluded, "your baby will mos' likely be bawn 'bout next June. You stay with your mammy till 'bout August, when you 'll be good an' strong again; then you come down heah to me. I 'll have the money for your furnichure and you can take that an' go to the city an' fin' that showman an' get your job from him. You can get a nuss for the baby, and everything will be jes' fine."

At another time Martha would have refused flatly to have anything to do with Susie, but now Susie, Indian though she was, seemed a veritable haven of refuge. She could have her baby in Summit Valley without enduring the prying Covelo eyes; she could

save her money; and she would have the necessary care. So great was her relief that she was almost happy for a few minutes, but the memory of yesterday's agony was too fresh to permit even a brief respite from sorrow, and she stepped wearily from her bed, her relief vanquished by a dull pain that grew with the day. She packed her new clothes in her trunk and dragged it over to Ann's house. Her old clothes she made into a huge bundle which she would fasten on the horse's back behind her saddle. In the afternoon she went to Kerr's store and asked him for her remaining fifty dollars; and the next morning at four o'clock she saddled the horse and was out of the valley long before the sun had risen.

She traveled slowly. She was not sure of her way, and, once she was in the mountains, she had to trust the horse to find the road in the darkness. Even when there was light she dared not attempt greater haste; the horse, a poor beast when young, was now almost feeble, and she knew that she had about twenty miles of hard traveling ahead of her.

It was a weary journey with nothing to break its monotony. Often she could see the valley below her, a smooth, round sea, its pale gold studded with dots of green and white, the trees and houses; but she had no eyes for its beauty, no desire to look back at it: nor had she any desire to look forward, either to the meeting with her mother or to the life she would lead with her for many months. All

that she could think of was Frank, Frank who had called her an Indian and deserted her. She began to hate him, and she rode slowly on, her eyes dull and resentful, her body drooping wearily in the saddle. Over and over again she told herself how she hated Frank, hated him, hated him. . . . But long before her journey was done, she was too weary to hate or even to mourn.

When she reached Summit Valley, she stopped at one of the few houses and inquired of its mistress the way to the Colfax place. The woman told her that it was five miles further on in the mountains and showed her the rough road that led to it. Martha thanked her and went on, so tired that the five miles seemed endless, a final calamity greater than any that had gone before.

She was welcomed at the Colfax cabin, a small log hut with two rooms, by the barking and yelping of half a dozen dogs and the excited screams of a six-year-old child. Susie came to the door and looked curiously at the rider. She had grown into a fat, sloppy squaw, her beauty entirely gone.

Martha stopped her horse and waited until a small boy had quieted the dogs; then she said calmly:

"I'm Martha, Martha Baker. I'm going to have a baby, and I want to stay with you through the winter. Will you let me?"

Susie's eyes brightened with recognition.

"Martha, Martha Baker," she repeated softly.

She was pleased, but her pleasure showed only in her eyes. Her welcome was brief. "Sure," she said. "All right. Stay here."

In the months that followed, Susie rarely said more, but Martha learned the family history from the children. There were seven of them living and five dead. Colfax, too, was dead, and the ranch was directed by the oldest son, a good-looking half-breed in his twenties. He had married a young squaw and lived a mile away in a cabin of his own. Two of the girls had married Indians, so that there were only four children at Susie's cabin, all of them under fifteen.

Susie never asked Martha for any information regarding her life, nor did she show the slightest interest in the fact that Martha was going to have a child. Having had twelve herself, she considered pregnancy a casual affair, something inevitable that one endured with indifference. Martha was a grown woman. Of course, she would have children, and whether they were legitimate or not was not of the slightest importance.

The one visitor was Joseph Santer, who came with his burros to bring Susie her winter supply of groceries, mainly flour and salt; but Martha did not see him. She gave her mother the money to pay him and then hid herself in the inner room, frightened lest he see her and report her whereabouts in Round Valley.

Slowly the months wore on, and her child grew within her. It brought her one comfort, the privilege of dispensing with her corset. Ever since she had worked in the hop-fields, she had hated corsets, and she took them off with a sigh of relief, horrible stiff things that would not let her breathe and which symbolized to her the crushing narrowness of the Covelo people.

By January the cabin was deep in snow, and no one ventured out except to care for the few farm-animals in the rickety barns. Day after day dragged by, the cabin dark, hot, and stuffy, and none too clean; the children playing at crude games, sometimes pleasantly and sometimes with bitter quarrels; the dogs constantly under one's feet, snapping, vicious mongrels that Martha hated; and Susie going softly about her household tasks or dozing comfortably before the fire. She had a habit of squatting on the floor that irritated Martha, but she was wise enough not to say anything; and Susie's placid acceptance of life she found so soothing that she was willing to forgive her her Indian habits.

When spring finally came and melted the snow, she was able to get out of the cabin. She spent most of her time wandering alone about the mountains, sometimes on foot and sometimes on her horse. Day after day she returned to the cabin so tired that she had to go to bed, but, although she

knew she was overdoing recklessly, the next day would find her miles away.

One afternoon she went as far as Bloody Rock, and she looked at the huge cliff jutting boldly from the mountain-side with glowing admiration as she thought of the story connected with it. Years before when the white men had first come into the valley, the Indians had rebelled at the usurpation of their lands and expressed their displeasure by killing a few of the invaders. Outraged, the whites had risen and attacked the Indians furiously, with the result that they drove them out of the valley and up into the mountains. Finally they cornered the Indians at the big rock and cruelly gave them their choice of surrendering to certain death or jumping off the rock into the cañon far below. The Indians had calmly chosen the more merciful death and, linking hands, had leaped from the rock together. Since then it had been known as Bloody Rock, and it held a strong fascination for Martha. Again and again she returned to it, and the idea of following the example of her ancestors began to take hold of her until it was almost a monomania.

One beautiful afternoon early in May when she had gone a few rods from the cabin on her way to the rock she met Joseph Santer. She came upon him suddenly at a bend in the road, so suddenly that it was impossible to escape him.

"How do, Mr. Santer?" she said pleasantly. "How are you?"

He nodded his head delightedly, and his red braids glinted like burnished copper in the bright sunlight.

"Fine-o!" he chanted. "How-eo are you-eo?"

His six burros paused in the shade of a tree, and Joseph's eyes gleamed with pleasure. It was so seldom that he had an opportunity to talk to any one that he glowed with happiness when one occurred.

"I'm fine." Then she hesitated. There was a question she wanted to ask, but she was afraid. All through the long winter she had nursed her hate against Frank, piling accusation on accusation, praying that some day he would have to endure twice the misery he had caused her. She wanted to know about him, however, and she wanted to know so badly that her curiosity got the better of her fear.

"Have you seen Frank Cross lately?" she asked with careful casualness.

"Oh, no-eo! Don't-eo you know-eo about him-eo?"

"Why, no. What about him?" Martha's heart began to pound fiercely; she felt as if she were suffocating.

"I know-eo all about-o it-eo! Jack-o Young-eo told-eo me about it-eo." Martha could have screamed with impatience as he slowly chanted his story, maddeningly adding "o" or "eo" to nearly

every word. It seemed that he had been to the Simms ranch the day after the murder and had heard Young telling another vaquero something about Frank. Curious, he had asked him to repeat what he had said, and, wildly excited, Young had complied. Joseph repeated the story in detail to Martha, told her how Frank had returned to the ranch and told Young that he was ashamed of the way he had treated a girl—Young had apparently not mentioned Martha's name—how he had said that he was going right back and ask her to forgive him and marry him, and how he had started back and been shot by Pomo Pete. Joseph explained Pete was accused of the murder because he had been seen with Young's horse, and Young had lent the horse to Frank.

Martha's mind reeled as she tried to grasp the significance of what she was hearing. Frank had really loved her, and she had hated him and cursed him for months. He had been on his way back to ask her forgiveness and to marry her. He loved her! So happy was she at first in the realization of that wonderful fact that she did not grasp at once that he was dead, but as Joseph went on talking the black news forced itself into her consciousness.

"Jack-o Young-eo said-eo that he would-o kill Pete-eo, and he did-eo two days-eo later-eo."

Frank was dead. He had died coming to her. He was dead. The world swam before her.

Joseph's voice grew farther and farther away, a distant rumble. She swayed blindly back and forth; suddenly she crumpled to the ground.

Joseph rushed to her, picked her up easily in his powerful arms, and carried her to the cabin. Two hours later her baby was born. It lived only a few minutes.

CHAPTER XXVI

MARTHA was sick for over two months, largely because she had lost the will to live. What did life matter, anyhow? Frank had loved her, and Frank and Frank's child were dead. There was nothing for her to live for, nothing, and she tried hard to die, but her body was stronger than her desire; it rebelled against her morbidity and finally conquered it sufficiently for her to find some pleasure in the wild flowers that the children brought her and in the warm, clear sunshine. By the middle of August she was strong enough to leave the ranch, and she told her mother that she was going away.

"Sure. All right," said Susie, but her eyes dulled sadly as they had when Roger Baker left her.

Then Martha did a cruel thing. It was cruel because she did it to satisfy her pride, not to be kind. She gave Susie all of her remaining money, paid her for her room and board and for the care that had been given her.

"I've got plenty of money in Covelo," she lied, "and you need this." Her manner was brusque because she was ashamed, and her shame was intensified when Susie's face beamed with pleasure.

Martha was generous like Roger Baker, the old squaw thought; that was fine.

And Martha thought, "I've paid her off just like I'd pay off any other squaw that'd taken care of me." She knew that Susie had n't been kind for money, but she felt better after she had given it to her even while she was ashamed of her deliberate cruelty. "It was a mean thing to do," she admitted to herself, "but Susie did n't know it was mean. She thought that I was kind; so it does n't matter. Besides, she *does* need the money."

She needed it far more than Susie did. Her horse had died during her sickness, and she was sure that Aunt Ann could n't have got more than fifty dollars for her furniture, if she had got that much. Never mind; she would manage, and she did n't want any favors from Susie.

She went down to the valley on one of the farm-horses with a small half-brother perched behind her. Her farewell to Susie and the children was a casual good-by, and they repeated it as casually. She reached Covelo after darkness had fallen and went straight to Aunt Ann's house.

Ann welcomed her with a cry of pleasure. "Martha honey! Chile, I sho' am glad to see you. Who's the little boy?"

"He's Susie's boy," Martha replied, wearily sinking into a chair. "My horse died a month ago, and I had to come down on one of Susie's. He's

going to take it back in the morning. Can you put him up to-night?"

"Sho'ly, sho'ly." She bustled about, rattling pots and pans on the stove, setting the table, and chattering while she worked. "Set down, chile, an' res'. You are an awful small boy to go all that way alone. Jes' wait, though, till Aunt Ann gives you some dinnah. Then you 'll feel a heap bettah. Yes, suh; yes, suh. I 've got stewed mustahd greens, gran' ones, and some boiled ham. Martha honey, you look awful thin an' peaked. Have you been sick, honey?"

"Yes, I 've been sick for two months. My baby was born a month too soon, and it died. I 've been sick ever since, and I guess the ride to-day was too much for me. I'm awfully tired."

"Well, jes' as soon as you get a little somethin' in your stomach, you can go to bed; and we 'll talk in the mawnin'."

The boy was sent back with the horse early the next morning, and then Martha and Aunt Ann sat down to make plans.

"I 've got fifty dollars for yuh, honey," Ann explained; "that 's all I could get for the furnichure."

"That's all it was worth."

"Tha's right; tha's all it was. Now lissen: nobody in Covelo knows nothin' about yuh. Lots and lots of folks asked me where you all had gone, an' I jes' said that you 'd done lef' town, an' I

would n't tell 'em no more no mattah how much they asked. An' nobody knows you are heah now, and they ain't no reason why they should know. I 'll go down an' see Marvin Terry and tell him to stop heah for a passenger for his stage tomorrá mawnin'. The stage leaves at five o'clock; so it 'll still be dark. Nobody ain't goin' to see yuh; nobody ain't goin' to know nuthin' 'bout you a-tall. You get in that thar stage an' go down below an' see that Mistah Showman, an' then ev'rything's goin' to be all right."

"I suppose so," Martha agreed languidly. She did n't care very much whether everything would be all right or not, but she did want to get away from Round Valley, as far away from it as she could, the farther the better. She hated the place, everything about it, and everything in it except Aunt Ann. Where she went made little difference to her just so long as she escaped from the circle of mountains that had surrounded her all her life.

Ann bought her a couple of traveling-baskets, big, box-like affairs with a lid a little larger than the container so that it would fit down on it. Each basket was bound with two straps that slipped through another strap on top to which a handle was sewed. Martha opened her trunk and packed the baskets with the clothes that she had made for her wedding, and then she sat down and waited for night to come while Ann bustled about, washing or

ironing, and telling her all the valley gossip for a year past.

Suddenly Martha thought about her guitar. How could she carry the two big baskets and the guitar, too? She could n't; that was all there was to it. It was impossible to take the guitar with her, but she felt that it was equally impossible to leave it behind. The guitar was more than a symbol; it was not only a certificate of her white blood but an amulet against bad fortune as well. She discussed the problem with Aunt Ann, and it was finally agreed that Ann was to express the guitar just as soon as Martha had a permanent address.

The big clumsy stage rattled up to the door the next morning, and Marvin Terry shouted for his passenger. Martha was relieved to find that there was no one else in the stage, and Terry assured her that she would be alone.

"You'd better sit up here with me," he said, peering down at her through the darkness. "You 're Martha McLeod, ain't yuh? Here, give me them baskets. I'll take care of 'em."

Martha handed him the baskets and replied quietly: "I'll sit in back. Yes, I'm Martha McLeod. I'm going to Ukiah." She turned to say good-by to Aunt Ann. The old colored woman folded her in her arms and kissed her warmly.

"Good-by, Martha honey," she said. "Don' you worry none; ev'rything 's goin' to be all right."

Martha returned the kiss. "Good-by, Aunt Ann. You 're the only friend I've got. I'll let you know my address right away, so you can send the guitar. Don't forget it. Good-by. I hope I see you again some day."

"I won't forget it. Good-by. Now git in the stage, honey. Marvin's waitin'."

Martha kissed her again and then climbed into the back seat. Terry cracked his whip.

"All right back there?" he called.

"Yes."

Aunt Ann's waving black hand was invisible in the darkness, but her quavering voice rose above Terry's cries to his horses. "Good-by, Martha. Good-by."

"Good-by, Aunt Ann. Don't forget to send my guitar. Good-by . . ."

The stage swayed and rattled at a swift pace for the three miles to the edge of the valley; then it moved slowly as the four horses struggled up the steep mountain road. The sky was flaming with ragged red banners when they reached Inspiration Point, and Terry stopped to rest his horses. Martha leaned out of the stage and looked back at the valley. It was beautiful, a dream-place in the splendor of the rising sun, a crystal topaz sparkling fire, a divine jewel marvelously set; a pigsty garlanded with flowers, a brothel in a jeweled palace. As Martha looked, she was swept by a wave of

nostalgia, a mad desire to go back to what was known, horrible though it was, rather than face the unknown, wonderful though it might be; then her hatred for the valley and all it contained dried her brimming eyes—and she leaned back satisfied as Terry cracked his whip and urged the horses on. A bend in the road hid the valley. “I hope I never see it again,” she thought bitterly, “never again.” But suddenly she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. “Oh, Frank dearest, my dear, my dear . . .”

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY reached Ukiah the afternoon of the second day, and at Martha's request Terry drove to the Grand Hotel. She was glad to see the same clerk that she had met before. His homely face, freckles, buck-teeth, and gold fillings, all gave her a feeling of security. He looked at her curiously as he helped her down from the stage and took her baskets.

"Ain't you been here before?" he asked as they entered the lobby and he stepped behind the desk.

"Yes, several years ago."

"I thought I remembered you. But you ain't lookin' very well. Been sick?"

"Yes, a little." She registered, was conducted to her room, and once more had the privilege of bathing in the zinc-lined bath-tub. After she had dressed, she went down-stairs to the office and accosted the clerk.

"I want to go to San Francisco. The train comes here now, does n't it?"

"You bet! It's been here two or three years now. Say, we had a great time the day they drove the last spike. Yes, sir, you don't have to go to Cloverdale any more; you get on the train right

here at our own depot, and in six hours you are in San Francisco—and it's a hundred and twelve miles, too. Ain't it wonderful?"

"Indeed, it is," Martha agreed warmly. "What time does the train go?"

"Oh, you need n't worry about that. The night clerk 'll get you up to-morrow mornin', and we've got a bus that 'll take you right down to the depot. You go in and buy your ticket, and then you ain't got nothin' to do but get on the train and set there."

"The train takes you right to the city?"

"Oh, no. It takes you to Tiburon. When you get there, you just follow the crowd on to the boat. It takes most of an hour to cross the bay, but it's an awfully pretty ride. Well, you land at the Ferry Building—and there you are."

Martha leaned against the desk and frowned perplexedly.

"I see," she said slowly, "I see. But what do I do after I get to the city? I've got to go to a hotel, and how will I get to one?"

"That's easy, too," replied the clerk. "I don't suppose you want to go to an awful swell hotel like the Palace, do you?"

"Oh, no! I can't afford anything expensive."

"I thought not. Well, you'd better go to the Russ House. It's a good hotel, right down town, and it don't charge near as much as the Palace. They have a bus at the Ferry Building, too. You

follow the crowd out, and you 'll see all the hotel buses right out in front. You get in the one marked Russ House, and it 'll take you right there."

"Oh, that 's fine!" exclaimed Martha in great relief. "I was afraid I 'd get lost, and I can't this way. I'm awfully grateful to you."

The clerk grinned at her and thought she was darned pretty even if she was kinda pale and skinny. "Gee, I 'm glad to tell you anything. You bet! If there 's anything else you wanta know, just ask me. I 've been down below twice, and I'll be glad to tell you all about it."

Martha was awakened the next morning before daylight by an imperative knock on her door. Frightened, she leaped out of bed, fearful lest she miss her train. She was more frightened, however, when she saw the engine puffing up and down the tracks, pushing the cars into position. She had n't thought it would look like that, with black smoke and sparks belching out of it. It looked like a terrible monster, something cruel and evil. But her need of the engine and its power was greater than her fear of its possible cruelty, and the red plush seats in the coach were so rich and beautiful that she quite forgot the engine in her admiration.

The journey seemed short, almost too short, so fascinating did she find the almost inconceivable speed of the train, the little towns it stopped at, and the ever-changing scenery. When they reached

San Rafael and she began to get occasional glimpses of the bay, she stared in wonder at the flat surface of the water. She had never seen even a lake before, nothing but the turbulent mountain rivers of Mendocino County, and she had never dreamed that a large body of water could be smooth and quiet. When they arrived at Tiburon, she followed the crowd to the ferry-boat, her two baskets banging against her legs and tasking her strength. She was glad that she had n't tried to bring the guitar with her, too, but she felt uncomfortable without it, almost as if she had left part of her body behind, the main part—her whiteness.

The boat was even a greater miracle than the train. She had read about boats often enough, but she had not expected to find anything so huge: why, it was bigger than even the Covelo flour-mill; it was almost as big as the Grand Hotel; and when its wheels began to turn and the water churned white and swirling from its sides, she was almost overcome with awe. The fact that it could move, like the train, without anything pulling it was wonder enough without its tremendous size and luxurious appointments. She began to be afraid, afraid of the huge boat, of the chopping waves of the bay, of the people about her, of the strange life that lay ahead. And when they approached San Francisco and she saw its many hills outlined with buildings, saw dozens of boats, some of them larger than the

one she was on, saw the Ferry Building, unbelievable in its size, her fears were multiplied. She could n't go through with what was ahead of her; she knew that she could n't.

Eventually, however, the boat docked, and there was nothing for her to do but follow the crowd and trust tremblingly to fate. As she stepped into the arcade of the Ferry Building, she heard men calling the names of hotels. Relieved, she listened for one to say the Russ House, and when he did she hurried forward to him and gladly surrendered her baskets into his care. Terror after terror was piling on her: the crowds of people, the noise, the clanging cable-cars and horse-cars, the wagons jolting over the cobblestones, the boys calling newspapers—all the noises of a city struck her at once, and they struck her so sharply that she drew back in the bus as if the contact were physical. She was glad that the bus was drawn by horses. She would n't have been surprised if it had run alone like the train and ferry-boat, but she could n't have endured riding again in a vehicle that apparently worked by magic. The cable-cars seemed fearful things, and she made a silent vow that she would never ride in one: she would always take a horse-car; they, at least, looked safe and normal.

The hotel proved quiet and pleasant, and the clerk was so kindly that she let him give her a room that cost twice what she could afford. She offended

the bell-boy by neglecting to give him a tip. He did not understand why she thanked him so earnestly for carrying her baskets, and she did not understand why he took so long in getting out of the room. She had her lunch in the hotel dining-room, but she was so shocked by the prices asked that she made up her mind to get her food elsewhere in the future. She did n't tip the waiter, either, but she had never even heard of the word, not to mention the custom.

She decided not to seek Mr. Cleary until the next morning. The trip had tired her, and she wanted to look her best when she saw him. Venturing out of the hotel seemed a dangerous undertaking, but her curiosity was greater than her fear, and she set out timorously to see the city. She saw little because what she saw so dazzled her that she viewed everything for a long time. The Call Building simply could n't be as tall as it was. She took for granted a mountain nine thousand feet high, but a building that boasted eighteen stories was beyond her belief even when she looked at it. The stores were nothing less than palaces, and their window-displays filled her with admiration and despair. She knew that her own clothes were hopelessly out of style and that her broadcloth suit must look ridiculous. All in all, nevertheless, it was a wonderful afternoon, and she returned to the hotel, after having dined frugally at a cheap restaurant, feeling

a little better. The city was more marvelous than she had ever dared imagine; and Mr. Cleary had said that he would buy her new clothes.

Night brought disillusionment. Emboldened by her pleasurable afternoon and soon weary of the hotel, she decided to see more of the enchanting city. Carefully noting landmarks to guide her back, she walked down Montgomery Street to Market and then down Market to Kearney. Most of the stores were open, and she walked slowly along, gazing avidly in the lighted windows, staring at the wonders they contained. Everything she saw seemed a miracle, and she became so engrossed that she ceased to watch where she was going. Suddenly she noticed that the street she was on was not so well lighted as Kearney had been—the street lights were miracles in themselves—and that the people were fewer. Frightened, she paused and looked about her. There was a blaze of light a few blocks ahead. "That must be Market Street," she thought and hurried to it. As a matter of fact, it was Pacific Street, the heart of the tenderloin, San Francisco's notorious Barbary Coast.

A man grabbed her arm. "Hello, baby!" he cried. "Let's go in here and have a drink." He was a fat, red-faced man, and his breath smelled of whisky.

She snatched away his arm and hurried down the street. Women garish with painted cheeks and

bleached hair shrieked in raucous merriment as they hurried in groups to the dance-halls or clung affectionately to men's arms. Half a dozen sailors passed singing with drunken glee. One of them reached out suddenly and chucked Martha under the chin. "Meet me in Singapore, girlie," he cried. "I 'm on my way." Brazen music blared hysterically from the dance-halls, and owners of amusement-booths shouted their wares above the noise. Every other building seemed to house a saloon, and Martha could see the men clustered around the bars, drinking huge glasses of beer and yelling at the women as they passed.

Man after man accosted her, some of them with humorous remarks about her clothes, some of them with tipsy ardor, and some with invitations spoken so grossly that she trembled with fear and revulsion. Finally when an evil-looking man tried to pull her into a house with a red light over its door she lost control of herself in a frenzy of fright and anger. Fighting and scratching, she tore herself out of the man's grasp and fled down a dark side street, running blindly into people, around corners, up alleys—anywhere to escape. Eventually she realized that the streets were becoming lighter and that she was bumping into more people; in fact, several had turned and expostulated angrily. She stopped and looked about her, breathing hard and holding her hand to her pounding heart. She knew

the building across the street, the one with hundreds of bow-windows; what was it? Why, it was the Palace Hotel, and she was only a few blocks from the Russ House. Feeling almost safe again, she hurried to the hotel. She went to bed in the dark, afraid to light the gas.

It was still dark the next morning when she awoke, but she felt sure that it must be time to get up. She decided to stay in bed, however, until daylight; the gas was too great a menace. Several hours later a pale yellow light began to steal through the long lace-curtains, and Martha stepped out of bed and peered through the windows. San Francisco was hidden by a fog, the first real fog that she had ever seen, and it seemed to seep into her very soul. Shivering with cold and fear, she dressed hurriedly and went down-stairs. After some trouble she found the little restaurant she had patronized the night before, but its doors were closed. Nothing seemed to be open, not even the stores; the street-cars rattled occasionally through the fog, and a few wagons clattered over the cobblestones; otherwise the city seemed asleep. Her broadcloth dress proved a poor protection against the chill of the morning; so she went back to the hotel and sat down in the lobby. The clock told her that it was half-past six, and she wondered what time city people started to work. An hour later she ventured forth again, and this time she found

the restaurant open. As she paid her check, she asked the girl at the desk if she knew where the Orpheum was.

"Of course I do," the girl replied pertly. "It's just around the corner from here on O'Farrell Street. You can't miss it."

Martha murmured her thanks and sought the Orpheum. A few brightly colored posters stared at her from the bill-boards, but otherwise the building looked deserted. She knocked on the closed doors, but no one answered. "I guess Mr. Cleary don't come down here very early," she thought and decided to come back an hour later; but after she had walked the streets for an hour the Orpheum was still locked, though the stores were open and people rushed by, vague, dark shadows in the gray fog. She made three trips before she found anyone, and then she was surprised to see a man sitting behind a window with a round hole at the bottom.

Shivering with the cold, she went to the window and asked tremblingly, "Is Mr. Cleary here?"

The man leaned down to the hole. "What did you say? Tickets?"

"I asked if Mr. Cleary was here."

"Mr. Cleary? Oh, Cleary's been gone six months. Mr. Jackson's managing the theater just now."

The man's face blurred before Martha, and she

thought that she was going to faint. He noticed her sway, and, jumping down from his stool, he hurried from the office and out into the lobby.

"What 's the matter?" he cried, putting his arm protectingly around her shoulder. "Are you sick?"

His kindness gave Martha strength, and she relaxed for an instant against his shoulder. Then, her vision clearing, she stood away from him and said softly: "I'm all right now. Thanks very much."

The man was young and kind-hearted, and the woman, notwithstanding her old-fashioned clothes, was pretty in a weak, tired way.

"You look sick," he insisted. "You'd better come into my cubbyhole here and sit down till you feel better." He held open the door invitingly, and, numb with despair, Martha passed him and sat down in the chair that he pointed to.

"What did you want Cleary for?" the ticket-seller asked, perching again on his high stool.

"He told me that he would give me work."

"Oh, I see. Doing what?"

"Singing."

"Gee, that 's different. If Cleary said he'd give you a job, Jackson will want to see you sure. He's in his office now. Wait a minute till I go in and tell him." He smiled at her pleasantly and disappeared through a door behind her. She had re-

turned the smile, once more encouraged and hopeful.

Two men were in the inner office, both of them in their forties. Jackson was a tall thin man with graying hair and keen blue eyes. The other, the press-agent, was small and dapper, meticulously neat, with a round face that was made owlish by spectacles with thick lenses.

"What is it, Perry?" Jackson asked as the ticket-seller came into the room.

"There 's a woman out here that wants to see Mr. Cleary, and she darned near fainted when I told her that he had gone east. She says he offered her a place as a singer."

"What 's her name?"

"Gee, I forgot to ask." He opened the door and called to Martha, "What 's your name, please?"

"Martha McLeod."

"Ask her where she comes from and where she met Cleary," Jackson ordered.

Perry repeated the question.

"I come from Round Valley up in Mendocino County," she explained, "and I met Mr. Cleary up there. He 'd come up hunting, and he happened to hear me sing."

When Perry returned to the office and told Jackson what Martha had said, he shook his head and murmured, "I don't remember Cleary saying any-

thing about her." He turned to the press-agent. "Do you, Torrey?"

"No, no, I don't think I do," the little man replied. Suddenly he slapped the desk and exclaimed: "I do remember. By God, she's right! Of course, he talked about her. Talked? Man, he raved. It was before you came, though. He said that she was the most beautiful woman he'd seen in years and that she could sing like Patti. I remember all about it now. He heard her singing 'La Paloma' at a church social or some such thing, and he tried to get her to come back with him. But she would n't; said she was going to get married or something. What's she like, Perry? Is she pretty?"

Perry hesitated. "Well, I don't know," he responded slowly. "I guess she was pretty once. She's got nice features and great big black eyes, but she's awfully thin and colorless. She looks as if she's sick or something. And she's got on the darndest-looking dress and hat, the kind women were wearing about three years ago. The dress has funny sleeves, and the hat's all covered with lace and flowers. My mother had an outfit like that several years ago, but it sure looks funny now."

"The clothes don't make any difference," Jackson said sharply. "We can fix that. Of course, her clothes are funny if she comes from the mountains. Show her in, Perry." He turned to the press-agent.

"Cleary usually knew what he was talking about, and if he said the girl was a find, she probably is."

He looked keenly at Martha as she came into the room and got up to offer her a chair.

"I'm sorry Mr. Cleary is n't here, Miss McLeod, but I'll be glad to see what you can do."

"I'm Mrs. McLeod," Martha said shyly. "I'm divorced."

"Oh, I see." He drummed on the desk with his finger-tips and wondered what Cleary had seen in the girl. She seemed a listless creature, and, in spite of her fine eyes, she was no raving beauty. Her cheeks were thin and pale, her lips without a trace of color, and her clothes ridiculous. Oh, well, he'd give her a try-out.

"Of course, I can't promise you anything until I hear you sing," he began carefully. "This is Mr. Torrey, our press-agent, and he and I will act as a jury. Will you come this way?"

He rose and, followed by Martha and Torrey, went into the theater. Martha was surprised at the size of the dim auditorium and repelled by the strong odor of stale tobacco-smoke. She wondered what the little shelves were on the back of the seats and asked Torrey timidly.

"Oh, that's where the people put their drinks," he explained. "The waiters go up and down the aisles selling them."

Jackson led the way to the orchestra pit. He

turned to Martha. "Can you play the piano?" he demanded.

"Yes, a little."

"That 's good, because there 's no one here now to play for you. Sing anything you like. We 'll go back a way and listen."

He and Torrey walked up the aisle to the middle of the auditorium, and Martha sat down at the piano. She was n't frightened, but she felt dulled and weak, too weary to sing.

Her fingers, stiff and unsure from lack of practice, wandered awkwardly over the keys. For no reason at all so far as she knew, she decided on "The Last Rose of Summer." It was a happy selection. The warmth and fire had gone out of her voice, but sorrow and sickness had added a poignancy that it had once lacked. She sang with plaintive earnestness, and the two men were impressed.

"She 's got a pretty good voice," Jackson whispered. "Nothing wonderful, but it will do if she 's got anything else to show."

"Sure," Torrey replied softly. "It 'll pass. But I don't see why Cleary raved so. She is n't any beauty, and we can get plenty of singers that are better. Cleary said that she was wonderful when she sang 'La Paloma.' Let's have her do that." The auditorium echoed as he shouted his request.

Martha slumped despairingly on the piano-stool. Why, why had n't she brought the guitar? She

might have known that something would happen if she left it behind. She could n't play 'La Paloma' on the piano when she was in practice; it was much too difficult for her. Frightened by the knowledge of her impotency, she played the accompaniment with awful clumsiness, her fingers stumbling into ugly discords; and she sang almost as badly as she played. Her breath failed her repeatedly. She was n't strong enough, happy enough, to sing 'La Paloma'; and, shamed by her errors, she dragged it out to a spiritless end.

Jackson and Torrey held a whispered consultation; then Jackson asked her to come back to his office.

"I'm sorry," he began when they were seated, "but neither Mr. Torrey nor I feel that you will do. You've got a fair natural voice, but it lacks training and fire. To get over on the stage, a person has to have a great deal of spirit and dash, and I'm afraid that you lack those qualities."

Martha looked at her hands in her lap. She wanted to tell him that she could sing much better, that she was tired and weak, that she had never sung so poorly, but no words would come, and she felt tears wetting her lashes. Her pride forced her to her feet.

"Thank you," she whispered, and, blinded by her tears, she stumbled out of the room.

She went back to the hotel and tried to think.

Something had to be done and done at once. Her money was almost gone, and she was afraid of San Francisco. At first rational thought was an impossibility; two ideas repeated themselves over and over: they had turned her down and she was almost without money. She had been so sure that everything would be all right. It had never entered her mind that Mr. Cleary would be gone. Every one was gone. Frank was gone! Frank . . . Broken and terror-stricken, she threw herself on the bed and sobbed until her little strength was spent and she lay miserably quiet.

Finally the need for planning forced its way into her mind. What could she do? Where could she go? She hated the city with its clatter and its noise, its painted women and evil, pawing men. A desire for the quiet of the country, the gentle peace of the great mountains swept over her so strongly that she dragged herself from the bed and began to pack her baskets. She would go to—she would go to—where? Where? She could n't return to Round Valley. Nothing in the world would make her go back there. Ukiah? Yes, of course! Ukiah was the place. Hop-picking must be about to start. She would go back to Ukiah and pick hops. Feverishly she folded her clothes; she must make the afternoon train. Oh, it would be good to get away from this terrible city!

It was quite dark when the train drew into Ukiah

that night. A few people lounged around the station platform, and two buses were backed up to it. Two men, each with a lantern in his hand, stood in front of the buses and loudly called for passengers: "The Palace Hotel! The Palace Hotel this way!" "The Grand Hotel! The Grand Hotel!"

The Grand Hotel! Why, it sounded like home; and were n't the stars bright and the night quiet? Just listen to that cricket!

"Why," exclaimed the clerk, holding up his lantern, "are you back already?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she answered fervently. "Yes, I'm back."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE next morning Martha applied for work in one of the hop-fields and got it. Picking had begun the day before; so she bustled anxiously about buying the supplies necessary for three weeks of camping in the fields. Fortunately a tent was not needed. She bought several yards of cheap burlap, sewed two lengths together, stretched them around three trees, and was furnished with entirely adequate protection. There was n't the slightest chance of rain for another month, and so any more elaborate covering was useless. She dispensed with a stove also, planning to do her cooking over a camp-fire. When she had bought a sun-bonnet, a calico wrapper, a few pots and pans, a couple of blankets, a meager supply of groceries, a coffee-sack, and a barrel-hoop, she was all ready for work; and she had just four dollars and sixty cents left in her purse. The last cent, she knew, would be spent for food in the three weeks of hop-picking, but she would have earned forty or fifty dollars; therefore her poverty did not worry her particularly.

A friendly driver of a delivery-wagon took her and her supplies to the hop-field in the afternoon;

and by evening she was entirely settled and ready to report for work the next morning.

She had some difficulty in finding a cluster of trees that would serve as her home for three weeks. Most of the trees that were set closely enough together for her purpose had already been taken by campers, and the only three that she could find were about twenty-five yards from an Indian encampment. A group of whites were not much farther away, however, from the trees on the other side; so, quite unconscious of the irony of the location she was choosing, she stretched her burlap around the trees and made her camp—half-way between the whites and the Indians.

She was so busy in the afternoon that she had no time to think of the tragedy of the day before, but when evening came and she had eaten her frugal supper she sat down on the ground with her back against a tree and tried to think out her situation. The Armstrongs were gone, Mrs. Nichols was gone, Wally was gone, Frank was gone—every one was gone, and with them had gone her chance of earning a living. Yes, and Mr. Cleary was gone, and he had taken with him the biggest chance of all. Nothing seemed left. Three weeks of labor, a little money—and then what? Perhaps she could get work in Ukiah. She would see after hop-picking. . . .

When she undressed that night and took off her

corset, she held it in her hand and looked at it in the pale moonlight that sprayed through the leaves of the trees. She had put the corset back on when she left Summit Valley, and it had tortured her cruelly in the few days that had elapsed, the few days that seemed like years. She stared at the corset angrily and threw it on the ground. "It's the last time I'll wear it," she thought, "no matter what happens. Life is n't worth living bound up in things like that."

She went to work at six o'clock the next morning and by noon had received two unpleasant surprises. She found that she was very weak and that she could pick but slowly; her hopes of earning fifty dollars were impossible, she would be lucky if she earned twenty-five: and she came face to face with Mrs. Elson, who looked at her blackly and went on. Several white women had spoken pleasantly to Martha in the morning, but in the afternoon they ignored her. Gossip flies about a hop-field with magical speed, and Martha knew that Mrs. Elson had told her story. She knew, too, that her chances of getting respectable work in Ukiah were very small. The following day they seemed completely wiped out; she saw two women from Round Valley, and after that meeting she was left strictly alone by every white woman in the field. The men were pleasant to the slender woman with the sad black eyes when none of their women-folk were around,

but she was afraid of their clumsy advances and repelled them coldly.

A week went by and she found that she was making hardly more than a dollar a day, and the terrible loneliness of being utterly by herself in the midst of hundreds of laughing, shouting, singing people seemed to sap her little remaining strength and kill all her desire to work. After an hour of picking, her back began to ache; and the hot sun blazed down on her until the hop-blossoms danced dizzily before her eyes and her temples pounded dully.

By the middle of the second week she could not endure her loneliness any longer. She had to talk to some one, no matter who it was. A few paces away the camp-fires of the Indians were dancing merrily, and she could occasionally hear their voices, even at rare intervals a low laugh. She wished she had her guitar with her. It would be company. . . . Vaguely she wondered if she would ever send to Aunt Ann for it, and, bitterly fatalistic, she supposed not. . . .

For some time she sat staring at the fires and the shadows around them; then, walking like a woman in a dream, a woman guided by some power outside herself, she moved slowly across the intervening twenty-five yards and stopped by the first camp-fire.

The Indians looked at her, apparently without surprise. An old man spoke first.

"Martha?" he asked. "Susie's Martha?"

She nodded gravely, and he pointed to a group of squaws seated a little way from the fire by themselves. Without a word, she sat down among them and listened to their soft-voiced chatter. She was not surprised that the Indians knew who she was. There were a hundred or so Yukis and Wylackies from Round Valley in the field, and she had no doubt that they had told the Pomos about her; it was a Pomo encampment to which she had come.

She sat for an hour saying nothing; then she arose and went back to her three trees feeling comforted and free from pain. Outside of the old man's question, no word had been spoken to her, but she had known that she was welcome, that her mother's people had received her. In the morning, however, she was ashamed of having deliberately sought the society of Indians. "I'll get just like them if I don't watch out," she scolded herself. "Dirty things!"

But when night came and she sat alone before her burlap shelter, again she was overcome by an overpowering loneliness. If she only had the guitar! . . . Shouts of laughter came to her from a camp near-by; somewhere in the darkness a group of boys and girls were singing "Swanee River"; and somewhere else another group was singing "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean." Not another person in that great field was all alone, not another one. They were gathered in happy groups around camp-fires,

white people or Indians—one or the other—and they were with relatives, with friends; they were laughing and singing, and she was alone, alone to think of Frank—and Frank was dead. Tears trickled down her cheeks, and they burned white marks on her soul. Weary and uncaring, she rose to her feet and walked to the camp-fire of the Pomos to sit down among them and find comfort in their silent welcome, peace in their nearness.

For the five succeeding nights she sat with the Indians, but after the fifth night she visited them no more. A white man had spoken to her while she was picking hops, a boy not more than twenty, with a round, chubby face, twinkling brown eyes, plump red cheeks, and a nose so absurdly pug that it made even Martha smile. His nose reminded her of Mrs. Armstrong, but his brown eyes, sparkling with merriment, and his quick, boyish smile reminded her of Frank; and she did not repel his advances as she had those of the other men. He had picked the same row of hops with her, she on one side, he on the other; and all afternoon he kept up a gay, prattling chatter that was like cool water to her parched soul.

When work was over, he pulled her big sack of hops to the scales for her and then walked beside her as she went back to her camp.

“Here I’ve been working with you all afternoon and talking to you,” he said in his blithe way, “and

I don't know your name. Mine's Roy Lawson. Come on and tell me yours."

Martha stopped by her trees. "Mine's Martha McLeod," she replied.

"Gee, that's a pretty name! Say, I'm coming over to see you to-night. You don't mind, do you?"

He smiled: his mouth smiled, his brown eyes smiled, even his pug nose seemed to smile. He smiled like Frank.

"No; no, I don't think I mind. I'll be glad to see you."

He came shortly after dark, and she sat with him on the ground, their backs to the same tree, and talked with him about their hop-picking. Roy told her all about himself, how he had finished high school the year before and gone to work on his father's farm. "I think maybe I'll be a lawyer, though," he confided. "I kinda like to talk."

The night was very beautiful. The stars were brilliant, innumerable black diamonds scattered on black velvet, and the camp-fires glowed and flamed all about them. As usual the boys and girls were singing "Old Black Joe," "Forty-eight Blue Bottles Hanging on the Wall," "Seeing Nelly Home," "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground," and various hymns. Gradually Martha and Roy grew silent, and she felt his arm stealing around her waist. She did not resent his arm; she welcomed it, so good it was once more to know affection, no matter how

trivial it was, no matter how ephemeral. She did not care if he left her forever the next day. Nothing mattered but his smile like Frank's and his strong arm drawing her closer and closer. Her head slipped down into the hollow of his shoulder and rested there. Slowly, stealthily, his arm moved upward and his fingers sought her breast. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO weeks later a tired-looking woman with thin cheeks and large black eyes rang the bell of a Ukiah cottage and waited, her body sagging wearily. A minute later the door opened, and the mistress of the house confronted her.

"Yes?" she asked impersonally.

"I'm looking for work," said Martha. "I'm a good cook and a good seamstress. I promise you that I'll try very hard to please, and I don't ask high wages. Fifteen dollars a month will do."

"You're from Round Valley, are n't you?" the woman asked, suspicion in her voice.

"Yes."

"I don't need anybody," and the door closed decisively.

Martha's face blanched. She had tried fifteen houses, and fifteen women had either asked her if she was Martha McLeod or if she was from Round Valley, and when they found out that she was the woman they had heard scandal talked about, they had all told her that they did not need any one.

She had only a dollar in her purse, and she felt

ill, terribly ill, dizzy and nauseated. The Pomo rancheria was three miles away. She wondered if she could make it. Somehow, some way, she had to. * * *

CHAPTER XXX

THE Pomo Indians were holding a powwow. The men danced around a few burning sticks, and the squaws chanted a monotonous song and snapped split willow sticks so that they clacked like castanets. There was little intensity to the dancing or singing; with the years the spirit had gone out of the Feather Dance, and the Indians celebrated it more for the sake of tradition than for any pleasure that they got out of it. The men no longer suffocated in the sweat-house and then plunged into an ice-cold stream. There was n't even a sweat-house at the rancheria, and a few of the dancers wore cotton underdrawers that looked grotesque under their mantles and skirts of feathers.

A squaw sat by a tree idly watching the dancers. She was very fat and very dirty. Her straight black hair was clipped at the nape of her neck—her mother had died a few months before—and a papoose, bound in a basket, lay in her lap. Beside her sat a little girl about ten years old with black hair and brown eyes, a pale skin, and an upturned nose such as no full-blooded Indian ever had. The baby began to cry, and the squaw opened her waist

and lifted it to her breast. Eagerly the baby mouthed her nipple and ceased its wailing.

"Mama," said the little girl in English, "look at that white man over there. He's been looking at you ever since you sat down. I mean the one with the funny nose like mine."

The squaw looked and saw Roy Lawson standing on the outskirts of the crowd with a white woman—his wife, she knew. He was staring at the squaw with confusion in his eyes. It was the look of a person who is trying to place some one. Obviously he had seen the squaw somewhere before, but he could n't remember where.

"Is n't it funny the way he keeps lookin'?" said the little girl. "Do you know him, mama?"

"Yes," her mother replied. "He's—" and then she stopped. She had been on the point of saying, "He's your father," but at that instant another scene flashed before her eyes, another Feather Dance with a squaw holding her little girl and pointing out a white man. "He's your father," the squaw had said; and the white man, glimpsed only for a few minutes, had taken hold of the little girl's life and made it agony.

"Who is it, mama?"

The question brought her back to her own daughter. "That man? Oh, that's Mr. Lawson. He's a farmer. Here, hold the papoose." She put the baby in the little girl's lap, buttoned her

waist, lifted herself clumsily to her feet, and joined the squaws.

A young Indian put a couple of sticks on the dying fire. Sparks flew, and the sticks flamed brightly. Back and forth danced the men, grunting and hissing, their bodies shaking, their feathers fluttering. The squaws clacked the willow sticks and sang softly—all except one squaw; she sang with a full rich voice that soared high and clear above the others. There was no happiness in her voice, no spirit, no fire; but there was contentment, there was peace. * * *

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